

# A View from the Moon: Allegories of Representation in Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and H. G. Wells

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The Egyptian playwright Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's (1898-1987) 1972 play *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* (*Poet on the Moon*) begins in the "Office of Space Explorations."<sup>1</sup> The office's Secretary and the Director are discussing the next mission to the Moon. Though the official purpose will be to test Moon soil for valuable metals and minerals, this voyage will also take along an unusual crew member: a Poet who longs to see Earth's satellite firsthand. The Director's condescending attitude towards the Poet sets the scene for the central conflict of this play of ideas.<sup>2</sup> Deriding poetry as "folly" (*takhrīf*) and claiming it lacks both theory (*"naẓariyya"*) and "experiments" (*"tajārib"*), the Director argues that the arts cannot compete with scientific knowledge (*Poet* 165; *Shā'ir* 86). In response, the Poet posits the primacy of "the feeling heart" (*"al-qalb alladhi yash'ur"*) in understanding humankind's place in the universe, especially as it opposes the machine-like nature of the astronauts who will accompany him (*Poet* 167; *Shā'ir* 91). Thus juxtaposing scientific knowledge and poetic sentiment, the first scene plants the seeds of the mind-heart dualism that al-Ḥakīm frequently tackles in his works.<sup>3</sup>

Previous scholarship has interpreted al-Ḥakīm's engagement with the relationship between the mind and the heart, and between science and literature, within the framework of his commitment to romantic nationalism, idealism, and bourgeois ideology (Starkey 75-107; Cachia 229-33). However, in-depth studies that investigate al-Ḥakīm's experimentations with popular science fiction themes are still lacking. Exploring these aspects of *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* reveals al-Ḥakīm's aspirations toward a transnational drama, one that could address global concerns such as the exploitation of scientific and technological developments in service

of colonial interests. Al-Ḥakīm's critique of colonialism becomes apparent as I read the play against H. G. Wells's novel *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), which similarly addresses themes of extraterrestrial colonization and the limits of scientific and literary representation. Furthermore, al-Ḥakīm's transnationalism is reflected in his choice of the scale of representation: Through his view from the Moon, al-Ḥakīm's Poet acquires an aesthetic vantage point that allows for a transnational and planetary perspective, no longer limited by the national and local.

Al-Ḥakīm did not explicitly categorize *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* as science fiction; however, his writings offer us important clues that reveal his interest in the genre, and specifically in H. G. Wells. In his autobiographical essay *Sijn al-'umr* (The Prison of Life, 1964), he alludes to Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* as "British author Wells's book on the journey to the Moon" and recalls the disappointment he felt as a teenager when he was unable to enjoy such curious works because of his academic struggles (*Sijn* 98; *Prison* 87).<sup>4</sup> Though al-Ḥakīm did not read English fluently, Wells's novel would have been available to al-Ḥakīm in French as the Henry Davray translation was published soon after the original in 1901, with the title *Les premiers hommes dans la lune*.<sup>5</sup> Al-Ḥakīm's short story "Fī sanat milyūn" ("In the Year One Million," 1947) also bears striking similarities to Wells's lesser known essay "The Man of the Year Million" (1893), suggesting that al-Ḥakīm was presumably in tune with the British science-fiction writer.<sup>6</sup> While these references do not explicitly confirm that al-Ḥakīm had read *The First Men in the Moon*, the many parallelisms between his play and Wells's novel allow for a comparative reading that provides insight into both authors' treatment of colonialism and the relationship between scientific and literary discourse. In al-Ḥakīm's text, we see how he modifies science fiction tropes to criticize global inequality arising from colonialism and its ideologies of progress. This reading, in turn, challenges the idea that science can serve as a universal language expressed in Wells's novel, yet also highlights Wells's complex approach to questions of the representation of alterity.

Beyond responding to and critiquing Western science fiction tropes, al-Ḥakīm's numerous texts involving space travel also

serve as commentary on the increasing globalism and technological advancements of the post-World War II era. Al-Ḥakīm's 1957 play *Rihla ilā-l-ghadd* (Voyage to Tomorrow, 1957) shows that his interest in the idea of space travel can be traced back to the incipient stages of the Space Race when the Cold War competition gave rise to a global frenzy about the possibility of space exploration.<sup>7</sup> The later *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* (1972), published three years after the Apollo 11 landing on the Moon, and a year after the founding of the Egyptian Academy of Scientific Research and Technology, responds to both national and global technological developments. This interest in space travel along with his service as the Egyptian representative to UNESCO in Paris between 1959-1960 shows al-Ḥakīm's concern not just for Egypt, but also for his nation's place in an increasingly global and technologized world. Rather than reading *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* as an escapist play of ideas, I argue that al-Ḥakīm utilizes the Moon and space travel to make a politically engaged, even if abstract and allegorical, statement about the potentials and limits of artistic expression.

In what follows, I first demonstrate how both al-Ḥakīm's and Wells's texts discuss the intersection of colonialism and modes of knowledge (i.e., scientific vs. poetic) by allegorizing representation itself. As the protagonists attempt to communicate with and speak on behalf of fantastical lunar beings, their struggles and failures serve as commentary on the limits of representing alterity in a colonial context. Then, I investigate the colonial encounter narrative depicted in *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* and argue that al-Ḥakīm's privileging of literary imagination within a mystical framework based in Sufism can be read as a form of resistance to the scientism expressed in Wells's novel. Examining the play through the lens of al-Ḥakīm's notion of the "ivory tower," I argue that the Poet's desire to reflect on the world from a distance should not be dismissed as simple bourgeois intellectualism. Rather, his concern for the whole world can be interpreted as a commentary on the postcolonial intellectual's desire to generate new global literary forms that might challenge the accepted universalism of Western forms of representation. In the last section, I take up al-Ḥakīm's conceptualization of a transnational dramatic form and examine how his project of "intellec-

tual popular non-realism” goes hand in hand with his interest in science fiction. Though al-Ḥakīm utilizes aspects of the science fiction genre to reflect on science, technology, and the future of mankind, he does so through his own idiosyncratic framework that aims towards a universal form that draws from both local and international traditions. To conclude, I briefly discuss the implications of studying al-Ḥakīm’s work in conjunction with Wells’s science fiction novel for the growing field of speculative fiction studies in Arabic literature.

### **Limits of Representation in Scientific and Literary Discourses**

Putting *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar* in dialogue with Wells’s *The First Men in the Moon* reveals the authors’ shared concern with the relationship between science and literature as systems of knowledge production and representation. Both texts present the Moon as the realm of the imagination, inhabited by advanced beings with whom the protagonists can only communicate through special means. In both texts, communication and representation are closely linked, since those who travel to the Moon struggle to adequately represent (through poetry or scientific reportage) the lunar beings so that they might be able to communicate their findings to those back on Earth. At the literal level, the trip to the Moon signals a spatiotemporal dislocation from the world, escaping immediate referentiality to a recognizable place. However, as the Earth’s satellite, the Moon is still bound to it and cannot escape its orbit. This necessary relationship between the Earth, the realm of history and material reality, and the Moon, the realm of imagination and the ideal, serves as the basis for an allegory of representation in both Wells’s and al-Ḥakīm’s texts. The challenge of representing the lunar other becomes a more universal challenge to express the kinds of high-minded ideals pursued by each author. For al-Ḥakīm, this involves representing spiritually advanced Moon Beings that can only be perceived by the feeling heart of the Poet; for Wells, this involves the technologically and intellectually advanced Selenites (lunar natives) that can only be approached by the uncanny intelligence of a mad scientist.

As al-Ḥakīm's Poet lands on the Moon, he encounters the Moon Beings that identify themselves as "forces of thought and emotion . . . Dispersed and regenerated by essence. Like sunshine and light" (*Poet* 172; *Shā'ir* 104 ).<sup>8</sup> These incorporeal, sexless beings dwell outside the restrictions of time and space, in a lunar utopia where physical constraints have been overcome. They can materialize in any shape they desire and communicate in human languages at will. Portrayed as a transcendental consciousness, unified in essence and existing independently of matter, these perfected Moon Beings first appear to the Poet in the form of "delicate, colored lights" ("aḍwā' khāfita dhāt alwān") and "a light, dreamy music" ("musīqā ḥālīma raqīqa") (*Poet* 168; *Shā'ir* 96). The play mobilizes the classical Romantic trope of the visionary poet for whom the creative act, the activation of the imagination, is a deeply mystical experience. In line with both the Romantic and the Sufi traditions that consider the heart the ultimate site of knowledge, the Poet is set apart from "the stone collector" astronauts ("jām'ī al-ḥajar")—previously identified as mindless instruments—by his "purity," ("ṣafā") and the light that radiates from his heart (169; 96). Building upon the tension between science and poetry introduced at the beginning of the play, the scene of the encounter affirms the superiority of poetry since the Moon Beings perceive the Poet as sharing a common essence that the astronauts lack.

Cavor, the mad scientist of Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*, is akin to al-Ḥakīm's Poet in his selfless idealism and commitment to the realm of the Moon, but differs significantly from him in his exaggerated belief in the function of science as a universal language. Upon landing on the Moon, Cavor and the narrator, Bedford, come into contact with a technologically advanced ant-like civilization called the Selenites and are captured by them. The Selenites are mostly of the "neuter sex" (260) and can dematerialize easily as they are not composed of solid matter (144). They live under the surface of the Moon in a highly stratified, functionalist society and are ruled by the Grand Lunar, who has a tiny body and a "hypertrophied brain"—an indicator of superior intelligence (248). During their extended discussions on how to approach these extraterrestrial beings, Cavor and Bed-

ford present contrasting views on the function of science. Cavor, with his desire to expand knowledge, is concerned only with the “purely theoretical” (25) aspects of science and therefore tends toward idealism: “I cannot consent for one moment to add the burden of practical considerations to my theorizing” (36). He repeatedly expresses his belief in the capacity of science to overcome the problem of communication between them and the Selenites, offering to use the language of geometry as a bridge (126-27). Underlying Cavor’s faith in the power of science as a language is his belief that the Selenites, as an advanced intelligent species, would necessarily share his curiosity for knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the idealistic Cavor, *The First Men in the Moon*’s narrator Bedford is marked by his rampant opportunism. Upon hearing about Cavor’s invention of a substance that would allow them to travel to the Moon, Bedford, a failed businessman and a dilettante author, imagines the different ways in which he could exploit this scientific breakthrough to make easy money. At various points in the story, he dreams of a galactic Cavorite company (24), “own[ing] and order[ing] the whole world” (26) and colonizing the Moon (112). He even imagines working their adventure to the Moon into a marketable story (44). In his study of Wells’s novel, Carlo Pagetti argues that the text’s main concern is the problem of communication between the realms of the real and the ideal, “between the petty-bourgeois narrow-mindedness of a man like Bedford and the abstract intellectualism of a Cavor, between the Earth and the Moon” (131). In an attempt to bridge the distance between the two realms, the novel mobilizes representational strategies of different narrative forms such as gothic tale, romance, and scientific report (126-27), exploring “the potentialities of the novel as a means of communication” (131). The juxtaposition of scientific and literary discourses in the framework of the novel underscores the idea that science—despite Cavor’s total belief in its universal applicability as a communicative tool—does not necessarily offer direct access to reality and needs to be mediated by literature.

In fact, throughout the novel, Bedford repeatedly acts as the unreliable intermediary between the reader and Cavor as he tries to translate the latter’s scientific theories into simple language

while acknowledging his own inadequacies: “Half his words were technicalities entirely strange to me” (17). After leaving Cavor on the Moon and returning to the Earth, he writes a novel depicting their adventures—*The First Men in the Moon*—which includes edited versions of Cavor’s broken reports from the Moon as an appendix. Bedford emphasizes the need to edit these detailed scientific reports, which provide “bare facts” (231) about the Selenite society and are more concerned with the transmission of data than the narration of their “adventure” (233). However, it would be a mistake to think Bedford an altruistic man for taking on the task of editing and publishing these reports. Unlike Cavor, he is not merely concerned with the expansion of knowledge but with the marketability of an adventure story depicting a fascinating encounter with exotic extraterrestrial beings. Calling this appendix “the popular first transcript” (230) of Cavor’s reports, the character of Bedford illustrates how literary narrative can be employed to mediate scientific discourse and make it available to a larger audience. Bedford’s desire for a marketable alluring story reflects his entrepreneurial approach to literature; he sees Cavor’s ethnographic reports on the Selenites as profitable information that could make him rich.

In contrast to *The First Men in the Moon*’s attempt to mediate scientific and literary discourses, *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar* depicts the scientific mind as completely antithetical to the artistic mind due to its incapacity to observe non-material phenomena. When the Poet offers a vision of the catastrophe that will befall both the Moon and the Earth if the Moon were to be colonized, the astronauts disparage his speculations on “hypothetically possible” beings saying, “It’s not our job to talk about hypotheses” (*Poet* 175; *Shā‘ir* 112).<sup>10</sup> Instead of discussing the philosophy of science, as Wells does, the play relegates speculations on the nature of the cosmos and humanity’s place in it to spiritual and artistic spheres. In this regard, al-Ḥakīm’s Poet paradoxically shares some characteristics with *The First Men in the Moon*’s narrator Bedford, since they both privilege literary representation over scientific reportage in their accounts of the Moon. Yet, whereas Bedford dreams of exploiting science to colonial ends by speculating on all the different ways in which he can profit from Cavor’s invention, the Poet takes

a skeptical stance on the possibility of a science at the service of the whole world instead of national interests, stating: “If these riches were to be distributed among all the people of the earth, I would be on your side and would not take this position” (*Poet* 176; *Shā‘ir* 114).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the total lack of communication between the Poet and the astronauts suggests that scientific epistemology lacks the means to understand and represent the human spirit.

Despite their different takes on the possibilities of communication between literary and scientific discourses, both texts end with an affirmation of artistic production, even if their rather ambivalent endings point to an awareness of the constraints of representation in literature. In *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar*, the Poet returns to Earth and futilely attempts to convince the Director of the “Office of Space Explorations” to abort the mission of extracting riches from the Moon. His poetic idealism, as one might expect, does not yield tangible results. As a last resort, he cries out in despair, asking for help from the Moon Beings who might intervene as a *deus ex machina* to resolve the seemingly hopeless situation. When the arrival of a new report subsequently confirms that there is nothing valuable in the Moon samples, we are left to wonder whether this outcome was influenced by the Moon Beings, by the Poet’s appeal, or was simply a matter of divine will (*Poet* 180; *Shā‘ir* 126). This ambivalent resolution of the threat of colonization points less to the effectiveness of poetic discourse than to the limits of linguistic representation and the human will. Although poetry is elevated above science, it still cannot bridge the gap between the real and ideal. It takes an ambiguous divine intervention to set things right. Despite this, the Moon Beings’ final message to the Poet is an encouragement to persevere, like Sisyphus, against all odds. *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar* thus differs from Wells’s *The First Men in the Moon* by identifying the invisible, the abstract, the immaterial—the transcendental human spirit which cannot be fully materialized or represented even by the Poet himself—as the agent of history whose power stems from its resistance to legibility.

Like *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar*, *The First Men in The Moon*’s last scene similarly depicts an inexplicable disruption that points to the limits of representation. Here, the reports that Cavor was transmitting from the Moon to Bedford terminate abruptly and mysteriously. As the scientific reports, according to Bedford, are “damaged,



broken, and partly effaced” (230) and do not form a “consecutive narrative” (241), he communicates the whole affair to the public as an adventure narrative. This ending is somewhat more ambivalent. On one hand, Bedford negotiates the idealistic and materialistic tendencies of science and literature through the creative act of writing a novel; as Bedford is the narrator, it is supposedly his very account of the adventure that we read. In this sense, Wells acknowledges the significance of scientific discourse by demonstrating how Cavor’s discoveries can be put to the use of artistic production. On the other hand, as the character of Bedford portrays a caricature of the bourgeois, colonialist mindset, Wells seems to remain skeptical of whether or not the “pure” science of a figure like Cavor can be ethically employed in a capitalist society.

Where Wells still has a sense of an idealized science—even if this science may not be accessible to the masses—*Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar* portrays scientific discourse as completely cut-off from the transcendental consciousness of the Moon Beings that embody humanity’s ultimate potential. Al-Ḥakīm’s Poet, the one in communication with these Beings, gives form not to empirical or communicable content (as is the case with Cavor’s reports on the Selenites) but to a spiritual essence that resists scientific inquiry. No meaningful communication is possible between the Director of the Office of Space Explorations, the astronauts, and the Poet since poetry and science are imagined as incommensurable. Science, unable to communicate with the immaterial essence of the lunar utopia, eventually fails to know and represent the invisible Moon Beings. Thus poetry, even when its voice is “weak” (“*ḍa‘īf*”) (*Poet* 178; *Shā‘ir* 120), should “stand firm and persevere” (“*aṣmud wa-astamirr*”) (*Poet* 178; *Shā‘ir* 121).

### Poetic Visions from the Moon

It is possible to explicate al-Ḥakīm’s choice of the Moon as the setting of this play as simply another example of his interest in employing fantastic elements to set the scene for an abstract play of ideas. However, considering that the publication of *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar* coincides with the Cold War and the end of the Nasserist era, al-Ḥakīm’s preference for the Moon as a neutral space

indicates a desire to reject the prevalent political bifurcation of the world into hostile blocks by way of appeal to a unified globe. The Poet, whose self-designated job is “to think and feel” (“*ufakkir wa-ash‘ur*”) (*Poet* 175; *Shā‘ir* 113) does not solely speak for the Egyptian people, as is the case in al-Ḥakīm’s early works such as *‘Awdat al-rūḥ* (*Return of the Spirit*, 1933). In his discussion of al-Ḥakīm’s romantic idealism in *‘Awdat al-rūḥ*, Paul Starkey argues that the novel’s discourse of the heart symbolizes the unified spirit of the people, which finds its authentic expression among the Egyptian peasantry whom al-Ḥakīm sees as carriers of the traditions of ancient Egypt (84-93). Yet another idealistic romantic figure, the protagonist Muḥsin becomes the mouthpiece of the people, giving form through his art to what the collective spirit calls for. Unlike Muḥsin, the Poet on the Moon is no longer the immaculate symbol of the spirit of Egypt. The transposition of romantic nationalist tropes into science fiction tropes in a colonial encounter narrative in a cosmic setting allows al-Ḥakīm to move beyond the nation-state framework in order to appeal to a global audience and a planetary consciousness.

Reflecting on the world from the Moon, the Poet of *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar* disapprovingly evokes images of a divided world, “broken into fragments” (“*mufattatat al-ajzā*”), “with boundaries and barriers between each part” (“*bayn kul juz’ wa-juz’ ḥudūd wa-sudūd*”), offering a critique of colonialism that stands in stark contrast to the ambitions of a character like Bedford (*Poet* 172; *Shā‘ir* 106). Similarly, in opposition to the astronauts who lack aesthetic and political consciousness, the Poet references the history of colonization in “South Asia when they went there in search of spices” and “the Americas when they came searching for gold and decimated the population”<sup>12</sup>—statements that testify to his concern for the world beyond Egypt (*Poet* 175; *Shā‘ir* 111-12). From the Moon, the Poet also gains a bird’s eye view of the Earth that produces new poetic reflections, remarking that “[one can] see every place on our earth from here . . . these continents on our earth with their lower tips pointed like hang-ing clusters of grapes” (*Poet* 172; *Shā‘ir* 106).<sup>13</sup> Though removed from the physical terrain of the world, the Poet displays an awareness of his responsibility as an intellectual to intervene into global—and perhaps even cosmic—history.

Given the unified, spiritual nature of the Moon Beings, any intervention that the Poet makes after his trip to the Moon would aim at bettering all humanity, rather than just increasing material wealth for one group. In *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar*, the encounter between the Poet and the Moon Beings is a friendly one and demonstrates the Moon Beings' benevolence, in stark contrast to the hostile confrontation narrated in *The First Men in the Moon*, which leads to the capture of the protagonists. Al-Ḥakīm modifies the classical narrative of the inimical encounter with aliens by highlighting the ontological connection between the Poet and the Moon Beings. This shared essence with the alien other is identified as “purity” (“*ṣafā'*”), implying a spiritual affinity that can only be discovered through a mystical or poetic experience (*Poet* 169; *Shā'ir* 96). For this reason, the astronauts, equipped only with technology and scientific methodology, cannot see the Moon Beings. In contrast, the Poet professes that he has always been in communication with the Moon Beings in his dreams; the beings likewise respond by acknowledging their longtime friendship (*Poet* 170-71; *Shā'ir* 100). Here, al-Ḥakīm once more marks the Moon as the realm of the imagination and the intellect with which the Poet claims to have developed an affinity in his childhood. However, beyond the symbolic level, the affinity between the Poet and the Moon Beings rewrites the colonial encounter narrative within an Islamic mystical framework, since the beings are defined as “ascending spirits” (“*arwahūnā al-ṣā'ida*”) (*Poet* 172; *Shā'ir* 104). This modification allows al-Ḥakīm to define superiority and progress as matters of spirituality rather than technological and scientific development.

In *al-Ta'āduliyya ma'a-l-islām wa-l-ta'āduliyya* (The Theory of Equilibrium with Islam and the Theory of Equilibrium, 1983), al-Ḥakīm modifies the theory of evolution that Wells frequently engaged with in his writing by transposing it onto the framework of spiritual perfection. Wells was critical of the possible destructive outcomes of unhinged scientific and technological progress in the process of evolution; nevertheless, he remained optimistic that the calculated application of scientific methodology could help humans “forecast” and moderate the future (*The Discovery* 36). Although he adopted a somewhat sardonic tone

in his mention of European colonialism in some of his fictional works,<sup>14</sup> he took for granted the underlying ideology of progress, which he believed would inevitably lead humanity toward a socialist “great world state” (51). In *al-Ta‘āduliyya*, al-Ḥakīm reveals his familiarity with the theory of evolution by citing Darwin, Spencer, and Lamarck (67) and argues for the inherently human capacity and desire to imagine and emulate “the highest being” (“*al-kā’in al-arqā*”) (51). Expanding upon the theory of evolution, he suggests that the capacity to recognize the existence of more advanced planes of existence marks not only the intellectual but also the spiritual potentiality immanent to human consciousness. This realization inspires the individual to contemplate “the sources of his mental and spiritual powers”<sup>15</sup> so that he can dedicate himself to the transformation of the self and become more aligned with the highest being (68). In *al-Ta‘āduliyya*, al-Ḥakīm’s usage of the concept seems to be limited to God, yet in *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar*, the utopian Moon Beings are also perceived as superior beings.

As “ascending spirits” (*Poet* 172; *Shā‘ir* 104), these beings are not so much alien others but beings that have transcended all dualisms of the material world and attained spiritual perfection. However, their path of spiritual development differs significantly from the evolution envisioned by Wells as it foregrounds the epistemology of the heart (*qalb*), which Ibn ‘Arabī considers the central human faculty for knowing the Absolute. due to its capacity to perceive the endless manifestations of God (Chittick 106-09).<sup>16</sup> In the heart, divine essence manifests itself in perceptible forms through the operation of the imagination (*khayāl*). Imagination, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, is the liminal realm (*barzakh*), which separates “a known from an unknown, an existent from a nonexistent, a negated from an affirmed, an intelligible from a non-intelligible” (qtd. in Chittick 117). Imagination as *barzakh* bridges the realm of the sensible with the realm of “the invisible, the concealed, the obscure,” which Adonis argues is “what the Arab Sufi aesthetic is based upon” (185). The influence of this Sufi aesthetic on *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar* can be seen in the Poet’s role as the mediator between the invisible Moon Beings and scientists who can only perceive empirical phenomena. The Poet, by virtue of the openness of his heart and imagination, acts as a visionary through

whom meanings take form and become manifest. Development of the imagination thus becomes an indicator of spiritual advancement and proximity to the state of the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*).<sup>17</sup> As this mode of knowledge and development underscores humanity's spiritual unity through God, it does not lend itself to the hierarchizing of human societies that undergirds colonialism. In this sense, it is not just the Poet's cartographic view of the world from the Moon that compels him to consider humanity in its entirety, but also his mystical understanding of the Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*). As the narrative resembles Sufi allegories of spiritual development along a path, *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* marks the utopian other—the Moon Beings—as a future self, a tangible image of humanity's actualized potential.

By contrast, *The First Men in the Moon's* narrator, Bedford, illustrates the operation of an Orientalist imagination, and reveals how fantasies about alien civilizations underlie the science fiction genre itself. This is seen in both Bedford's opportunism and his misuse of heavily edited versions of Cavor's reports to enhance his narrative. In *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, John Rieder examines in detail the entanglement of Western science fiction with the history of colonialism and argues that Bedford's "fantasies of appropriation" reflect his desire for "exploiting the exotic as a spectacular opportunity for wish fulfillment" (75). The production of such fantasies is closely linked to the operation of the colonial gaze, which Rieder defines as a system of knowledge production that "distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for the object, the one looked at" (7). The colonial gaze thus functions by undermining the self-representation of the other. *The First Men in the Moon* demonstrates how both science and literature as modes of knowledge production and representation can reinforce the workings of this gaze.

*Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* impedes the possibility of such ethnographic accounts on indigenous populations by rendering the Moon Beings invisible to a science of quantification. By rendering the object of the colonial gaze invisible and illegible to a science whose "job is to use instruments to uncover information and data,"<sup>18</sup> al-Hakīm hampers the colonial desires expressed by Bedford (*Poet*

175; *Shā'ir* 113). In al-Ḥakīm's play, the Moon Beings, unlike Wells's Selenites, do not function as the raw material that will serve as the basis for a marketable narrative. Al-Ḥakīm similarly inverts this schema of the colonial gaze in yet another play published in the same collection: *Taqrīr qamarī* (Moon Report, 1972). In this play, Moon creatures that are faced with the threat of colonization travel to the Earth to gather information on human life. The presentation of the play as a report prepared by extraterrestrials reverses the roles the colonial encounter engenders by presenting Moon creatures as subject-observers and producers of knowledge (47-81).

In "Idealism and Ideology," Pierre Cachia reads al-Ḥakīm's proclivity toward these otherworldly settings as indicative of his distrust of politics and his paternalistic belief in the power of the bourgeois intellectual to speak for the masses (233). Cachia further interprets this escape from history into the ideal (or the fantastic in this case) as a dismissal of the material realities of peasants' and workers' lives. Cachia's critique is pertinent in light of the playwright's essays on the role of the intellectual and the artist in society, published in *Min al-burj al-'ājī* (From the Ivory Tower, 1941). In this book, al-Ḥakīm responds to critics who accuse him of evading social issues, arguing that his view of the "ivory tower" calls for abstinence from party politics but not an evasion of social concerns.<sup>19</sup> Al-Ḥakīm defines the ivory tower as a place of intellectual activity—a state of mind in which the intellectual dwells in solitude, observing life and the development of his thoughts. Having dedicated his creative skills to the betterment of humanity, the intellectual in the ivory tower is free from any kind of attachment to a political party, trend, or the state (*Min al-burj al-'ājī* 29). Drawing an analogy between intellectual activity and sailing a ship, al-Ḥakīm claims that the intellectual should guide people "like the captain of a ship through an elevated glass cabin" ("*ka-ma yaqūd al-rubbān al-safīna min burjihī al-zujājī al-murtafi*") that allows him to observe life on the ship without being affected by the everyday "commotion of sailors" ("*haraj al-nūtiyya*") (28). When read solely in relation to al-Ḥakīm's philosophy as expressed in this text, the utopian space of the Moon corresponds to the ivory tower which grants the intellectual that elevated view of the whole world from a distance.

Taken at face value, the Poet's exalted sense of self implies a hyperbolic statement about the significance of art for social and political transformation—a recurrent theme in many of al-Ḥakīm's works.<sup>20</sup> However, interpreted within the framework of the allegory of representation that the text generates, the Poet's desire and subsequent failure to save the world points to the more complex issue of the difficulty—if not the impossibility—of representation. In this way, the play's reflections on the limits of literary discourse suggests an alternative to Cachia's take on "the ivory tower": The tower, or the Moon in this case, raises the question of how one might imagine and represent the whole world—an endeavor not without difficulties, as the play's ending suggests. In this sense, the Poet's desire to acquire a global perspective is akin to Jameson's notion of "cognitive mapping:" the mobilization of aesthetic means "to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (54). But at a difference from Jameson's conceptualization, the Poet on the Moon acquires a deeper sense of his place in the world not through his embeddedness in it but through his transcendence of everyday reality. Mapping, as a representational scheme, necessitates this kind of zooming out and abstraction in order to condense information to its essentials. In his attempts to map the world in his mind and situate himself as an agent in history, the Poet problematizes the inevitably reductive act of representation itself. From this perspective, the distance between the Earth and the Moon points to the inevitable gap between the real and the ideal which can never be fully reconciled in representation, and not necessarily to al-Ḥakīm's failure to connect to, and represent, a specific historical reality.

### **Intellectual Popular Non-Realism and Science Fiction**

Reading *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* alongside *The First Men in the Moon* allows us to rethink al-Ḥakīm's ideas on global literary forms, fantastic narratives, and Arabic drama that he expressed in his writings in the 1960s. Existing criticism examines al-Ḥakīm's dialogue with the European avant-garde and Absurdist Theater, which he would have come into contact with during his sojourns in France.<sup>21</sup> However, the connection between al-Ḥakīm's inter-

est in experimental forms of drama and science fiction themes needs to be further explored. As an experimental author, al-Ḥakīm turned to popular forms of non-realistic narration in an attempt to produce works in a new style he called “intellectual popular non-realism” (“*al-lā-wāqi‘iyya al-sha‘biyya al-fikriyya*”) (*Yā ṭāli‘ al-shajara* 22). Intellectual popular non-realism refers to works of fiction that have improbable and unrealistic plots that escape immediate referentiality to everyday life but nevertheless address significant social, philosophical, or political issues.

Al-Ḥakīm preferred the usage of this term instead of “avant-garde,” as he perceived his non-realistic theater to have a distinct quality due to its roots in Egyptian popular culture (*Yā ṭāli‘ al-shajara* 22). Furthermore, by highlighting his commitment to meaning and its communication through human characters, al-Ḥakīm differentiated his work from European forms of non-realism such as Dadaism and surrealism, which he thought were merely concerned with form (26). Though al-Ḥakīm did write obscure and absurdist texts such as *Yā ṭāli‘ al-shajara* (The Tree Climber, 1962), we can see al-Ḥakīm’s distinction clearly in *Shā‘ir ‘alā-l-qamar*: It utilizes the popular theme of space travel, the non-real Moon Beings as central characters, and bears intellectual weight with its concern for the form of representation and its intersections with colonialism. The ambiguous ending of the play that resolves through a mysterious divine intervention also suggests the author’s continuing commitment to the guidance of faith and divine will.

In the introduction to *Qālibunā al-masrahī* (Our Dramatic Form, 1967), he continues his discussion on the necessity of merging Eastern and Western forms, but with a more explicit focus on creating a universal form that transcends the nation state. Here al-Ḥakīm suggests combining local forms of performance such as the *muqallid* (imitator), *maddāh* (encomiast), and *hakawāti* (storyteller) traditions with what he calls the “European form” (“*al-qālib al-‘urūbbī*”). This form, he argues, is “universal” (“*‘ālamī*”) “because all the subjects and ideas of the West as well as the East pour into it” (14).<sup>22</sup> In *Thawrat al-shabāb* (*The Revolt of the Young*, 1984), al-Ḥakīm explicitly advises the young generation to be in dialogue with “Western culture or foreign civilizations” in order to contribute to “general human intellectual activity” (*Thawrat* 24;



*Revolt* 10). For this reason, if Arabic literature wants to produce an idiosyncratic dramatic form, it needs to adopt a double movement: aiming towards universality while building upon both local and global forms of drama (*Qālibunā al-masraḥī* 14; 23). This is not a call to simply return to authentic forms but to situate popular traditions of Arabic literature and performance within a transnational framework to render them globally legible and relevant (23). *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* illustrates the merging of forms by blending science fiction themes such as encounters with extraterrestrials with the idea of spiritual entelechy central to Sufi allegories.

Al-Ḥakīm thus responds to modern art's search for new modes of expression with a turn to popular forms of Arabic literature, which he proudly regarded as having discovered the attraction of non-realistic stories long before European modernism (*Yā ṭāli' al-shajara* 18-20). Yet, this turn to popular literature did not imply a rejection of European forms but was rather intended to qualify them. In *Qālibunā al-masraḥī*, al-Ḥakīm repeatedly highlights the significance of partaking in the “trends and developments” (*ittijāhāt wa-taṭawwūrāt*) of “the known universal [dramatic] form” (*al-qālib al-'ālamī al-ma'rūf*) (23). However, unlike European theater movements—which al-Ḥakīm regarded as being experimental simply for the sake of novelty—Arabic drama, he argued, would have a “practical, noble goal” (*hadaf 'amalī nabīl*): simplification, popularization, and reduction of production costs (22). As is the case with his concept of intellectual popular non-realism, al-Ḥakīm again emphasizes increasing the accessibility of Arabic drama.

Marvin Carlson argues that the use of popular and folkloric forms in Egyptian literature gained impetus in the 1960s with President Gamal Abdel Nasser's cultural reform program (“Negotiating” 532-33; see also Crabbs). Al-Ḥakīm's concern with creating new literary forms by reworking popular folktales and myths in conversation with contemporary European trends shows an active dialogue with this broader political agenda of cultural reform. Yet, despite noticing the similarities between Arabic oral storytelling traditions and contemporary avant-garde theater movements (*Qālibunā al-masraḥī* 23), al-Ḥakīm deliberately produced works of closet drama that were not meant

to be performed. As early as 1942, in his preface to *Bigmālyūn* (Pygmalion), al-Ḥakīm discusses his turn to the theater of the mind, which he defines as a form of closet drama that explores humanity's relationship to abstract concepts and forces (i.e., time, space, mental faculties) (14).<sup>23</sup> The later work, *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* not only continues with this trend, but allegorizes the concept of representation through the relationship between the Moon Beings and the Poet.

Al-Ḥakīm perceived the project of a non-realistic, intellectualized theater of the mind as “open[ing] a new door” (“*li-faṭḥ hadha al-bāb*”) of artistic opportunity to future authors, underscoring his vanguard position in the production of modern Arabic fiction (*Yā ṭāli' al-shajara* 22). Although he continued to value realistic fiction, his major interest lay in non-realistic forms due to readers' close affinity with the “illogical” (“*al-lā-ma'qūl*”) and the “irrational” (“*al-lā-manṭiqī*”) through the fantastic and mythical narratives of popular literature (18). He regarded the stylistic opportunities of these non-realistic forms as invaluable for expanding the aesthetic horizons of Arabic literature. Yet, he criticized fantastic folktales like *A Thousand and One Nights* for being devoid of a substantial intellectual engagement with questions pertaining to social life despite their entertainment value (*Adab al-ḥaya* 11). According to al-Ḥakīm, “even when popular art does not want to say anything,”<sup>24</sup> it still contains essential ideas that can be distilled and accentuated by the author (*Yā ṭāli' al-shajara* 23).

Al-Ḥakīm's project of “intellectual popular non-realism” also parallels science fiction's emphasis on critically engaging human reality and social issues, even when the non-realistic narratives operate in improbable alternate worlds. In fact, al-Ḥakīm's own distinction between fantastic narratives of folk literature and “intellectual popular non-realism” is strikingly similar to the distinction made between fantasy and science fiction in Anglo-American speculative fiction criticism. Darko Suvin's conceptualization of “cognitive estrangement”<sup>25</sup> has allowed critics of science fiction to argue that the fantasy genre is an escape from history and does not offer a sustainable critique of the present moment because it is not tethered to worldly reality. On the other hand, science fiction operates through

the double movement of cognitive estrangement and offers an aesthetic space to engage social and political issues. Estrangement draws the reader into alternative realities with remarkably different social structures whereas cognition pulls the reader back into the world of empirical phenomena by grounding the possibility of such alternative worlds in the existing scientific knowledge of the day. This dual movement, often considered the hallmark of science fiction, necessitates a connection to material reality often through allegorization.

As Paul de Man argues, allegory points to the insurmountable distance between reality and its representation, whereas the romantic symbol strives for a total, direct correspondence between the two.<sup>26</sup> Even when an allegorical text is decidedly abstract and tending towards idealism, it necessarily draws attention back to human temporality because of this unbridgeable gap. If *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* is read simply as a fantastic play of ideas with a neat schema of symbols, the text's meanings risk being foreclosed by claims of idealism, escapism, and disengagement with material reality. However, paying heed to the connection between "intellectual popular non-realism" and science fiction allows us to examine the play's mobilization of cognitive estrangement and allegory to draw attention to the limits of representation as al-Ḥakīm's Poet desperately strives for an impossible transcendence in language.

It is not my intention to categorize *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* as a science fiction text to make it fit neatly into an arbitrary definition of the genre; yet, *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* necessitates its discussion as the play addresses questions raised by H. G. Wells and other science fiction authors. By reworking classical science fiction themes into a play of ideas and presenting them within a post-colonial framework inspired by Sufi philosophy, al-Ḥakīm generates an idiosyncratic dramatic form. Reading *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* as an intervention into transnational drama situates the play in its global literary context and helps expand existing critiques of al-Ḥakīm's works that have not addressed the impact of his conversations with the science fiction genre on the development of his intellectual popular non-realism.

## Conclusion

Reading al-Ḥakīm's *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* alongside Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* helps us to expand the critical framework through which both authors' works have been interpreted. While al-Ḥakīm has been studied in conjunction with the European avant-garde and Theater of the Absurd, examining his experimentations with science fiction in the context of his intellectual popular non-realism reveals his significance as a predecessor to contemporary authors of Arabic speculative fiction such as Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq, Hassan Blasim, Basma 'Abd al-'Azīz, and Aḥmad al-Sa'dāwī. In recent years, Arab authors have turned to speculative fiction which encompasses various genres of non-realistic literature such as fantasy, horror, utopia/dystopia, science fiction, and the gothic to comment on pressing social and political issues, disproving the generic criticism that speculative fiction is mere escapism. By investigating al-Ḥakīm's and Wells's use of non-realistic narratives to discuss issues pertaining to the representation of alterity in the context of colonialism, we see how speculative fiction is conducive not only to addressing political concerns but also to raising questions on the potential and limits of literary mimesis. Through allegories of representation, al-Ḥakīm and Wells draw attention to the form of speculative fiction itself. It is this self-reflexivity that renders both intellectual popular non-realism and science fiction powerful vehicles for the deliberation of social and philosophical questions.

My reading of *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* sheds light on al-Ḥakīm's contribution to both speculative fiction and transnational drama by examining the unique way in which he aspired to create an intellectual and non-realistic dramatic form that would appeal to a global audience. As I have demonstrated, this intellectualized theater of the mind stages al-Ḥakīm's valorization of the speculative work of literature. When interpreted in conjunction with Wells's novel, *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar*'s universalizing abstractions, which are expressed within an Islamic mystical framework, can be read as challenging the colonial gaze by rendering illegible the utopian reality of the Moon. This play thus

illustrates al-Ḥakīm's attempts at creating a transnational dramatic form that would address questions of self-representation in the postcolonial context by overcoming the false dichotomy of either adopting Western literary forms or returning to origins. As such, the play does not only bring attention to colonialism as an issue of global concern but also responds to the assumed universality of European aesthetic forms by generating an idiosyncratic form of speculative, intellectual drama that al-Ḥakīm hoped could be globalized.

Criticism on Arabic speculative fiction is still in its incipient stages.<sup>27</sup> However, with more and more contemporary Arab authors experimenting with speculative modes of writing, one can expect al-Ḥakīm's drama to gain prominence as writers and critics alike seek to delve deeper into the genre's history in Arabic. This comparative reading not only presents an example of how canonical works of speculative fiction were received by Arab authors but also offers valuable insight on how the genre was modified and challenged by them. Situating al-Ḥakīm's speculative theater of the mind in its global literary context will yield new frameworks for discussing questions regarding adaptation, formal experimentation, and the reworking of traditional forms in transnational drama studies.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, I provide citations for both the original text of *Shā'ir 'alā-l-qamar* and William M. Hutchins's English translation, published in *Plays, Prefaces and Postscripts of Tawfiq Al-Hakim* vol. 2. All other translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>2</sup> The drama of ideas puts opposing ideas in dialogue with each other through characters that stand for different points of view on social, philosophical, or political issues. It is thus more philosophically oriented than action based. For a critical history of the drama of ideas in Europe and the impact of Platonic philosophy on the development of this form, see Puchner.
- <sup>3</sup> For a survey of al-Ḥakīm's discussion of the mind-heart dualism in his other works such as *'Awdat al-rūḥ (Return of the Spirit, 1933)*, see Starkey.

- <sup>4</sup> The original reads:  
«وقد تسلموا كتباً جديدة جميلة؛ ككتاب عن السفر إلى القمر للكاتب الإنجليزي "ويلز"».
- <sup>5</sup> The earliest Arabic translation appears to be Ṣabrī al-Faḍl's *Awwal riḡāl 'alā saḥ al-qamar*, published in 1989 by Al-hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Ammā li-l-Kitāb. The novel's late appearance in Arabic coupled with the fact that al-Ḥakīm was not very fluent in English suggests that he would have read the book most likely in French.
- <sup>6</sup> In "Man of the Year Million," Wells envisions the future human-kind as having significantly larger heads and disproportionately slim bodies. Written amidst the heated debates on social Darwinism and evolutionary theory in Britain, this speculative essay is an ironic reflection on humanity's increasing reliance on the mind and the intellect, to the point of bodily deterioration. Similarly, in "Fī sanat milyūn," al-Ḥakīm anticipates a dystopian future of technologically advanced but emotionally arrested humans with over-developed heads and shrunken bodies. Both authors mobilize the visceral metaphor of the oversized head to underscore their anticipation of a growing imbalance between the mind and a body that becomes increasingly less functional due to its reliance on new technological prostheses.
- <sup>7</sup> In "Science Fiction," Bhargav Rani argues that this play, although emulating Western models of science fiction, is noticeably distinct in its celebration of human life, art, and love as high ideals that need to be preserved—even if this requires the hampering of scientific and technological development (n. pag.). See also Hutchins 86-88.
- <sup>8</sup> The original reads:  
«نحن طاقات من فكر وشعور... تتبدد وتتجدد من تلقاء الذات... كالضوء والنور».
- <sup>9</sup> As given in the text: "When they find we have reasonable minds... they will want to learn about the earth" (143).
- <sup>10</sup> The original reads:  
«كائنات تفترض فرضاً أن لها وجوداً»؛ «ليس من مهمتنا أن نتحدث في فروض».
- <sup>11</sup> The original reads:  
«لو كانت هذه الثروات ستوزع على أهل الأرض جميعاً لكنت معكم».
- Al-Ḥakīm develops the idea of a science in service of the whole world in two other plays: *Al-Ta'ām li-kul fam* (*Food for the Millions*, 1963) and *Taqrīr qamarī* (*Moon Report*, 1972). In both of

these plays, the central idea is the possibility of an invention that will resolve the global problem of hunger and famine.

<sup>12</sup> The original reads:

«تريدون أن يحدث هنا ما حدث في الهند يوم ذهب إليها الباحثون عن التوابل . . . وكما حدث في أمريكا يوم جاءها الباحثون عن الذهب فأبادوا أهلها إبادة» .

<sup>13</sup> The original reads:

«هذه القارات في أرضنا بأطرافها السفلى المدببة كأنها العناقيد المدلاة» .

<sup>14</sup> In *The First Men in the Moon*, Wells depicts a farcical episode in which Cavor and Bedford become intoxicated after eating the fungus that grows on the surface of the Moon. In this delusional state, Bedford cries out, “We must annex this Moon! . . . This is part of the White Man’s burden” (112). Later on, as he is narrating the story, Bedford underlines the fact that he was intoxicated when he uttered these words and that arguing, “the arrival of Columbus was, after all, beneficial to America” required a “rather difficult proof” (112). The sarcastic tone of the episode coupled with Bedford’s sporadic acknowledgment of the ethical implications of their presence on the Moon (“What business have we here, smashing them and disturbing their world?” [154]) reveals Wells’s critical approach to colonialism. For another example of Wells’s critical approach to European colonialism in his fiction, see *The War of the Worlds*.

<sup>15</sup> The original reads:

«منابع قواه الذهنية والروحية» .

<sup>16</sup> See also Adonis 61-78. For a detailed study of the expressions of Sufi aesthetics and philosophy in modern Arabic literature, see Elmarsafy.

<sup>17</sup> In *Ḥadīth ma‘a-l-kawkab (A Conversation with the Planet Earth*, 1974), al-Ḥakīm discusses the significance of the capacity for creative thinking and imagination for humanity’s development. He also underscores the relationship between the heart and artistic production, stating: “Art is not merely a mathematical operation, or merely pure thinking. It is something the heart receives as well as the mind and so long as we speak about the heart, then we have entered the sphere of spiritual power” (*Ḥadīth* 101 ; *Conversation* 70).

<sup>18</sup> The original reads:

«عملنا هو أن نكشف بأجهزتنا عن بيانات ومعلومات» .

<sup>19</sup> Addressing discussions on committed literature, Verena Klemm argues that Arab authors produced heterogeneous interpretations of

the notion of commitment, some of which differed significantly from the Marxist social realist interpretation. This modified understanding of committed literature reflected an ambiguous attitude towards intellectual autonomy: Writers were expected to serve the people of an idealized unified Arab nation while refraining from commitment to political ideologies. Thus, serving the people was perceived as a moral obligation—a politically value-free activity beyond ideology and propaganda. Al-Ḥakīm's profound aversion to party politics and unyielding emphasis on intellectual freedom can be interpreted within this historical framework (Klemm, 55-57).

<sup>20</sup> For a brief survey of al-Ḥakīm's treatment of this theme in his other works, see Midhin.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Ben Hmid; Carlson, "Avant-Garde Drama"; Johnson-Davies; and Salama.

<sup>22</sup> The original reads:

«تصب فيه كل الموضوعات والأفكار من الغرب والشرق على السواء» .

<sup>23</sup> For a brief survey of al-Ḥakīm's novels and plays of the mind with excerpts from the texts, see Hutchins.

<sup>24</sup> The original reads:

«حتى عندما لا يريد الفن الشعبي أن يقول شيئاً» .

<sup>25</sup> See Suvin 3-15 for an extended discussion on "cognitive estrangement." This concept resonates with Brecht's "alienation effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*). Since al-Ḥakīm was familiar with the works of the German playwright and avant-garde theater in general, it is reasonable to assume that he was interested in experimenting with the idea himself even when he was not writing pieces with the material realities of stage performance in mind.

<sup>26</sup> De Man 173-209. For a more detailed analysis of de Man's distinction between symbol and allegory, see Mileur and Mirabile.

<sup>27</sup> On speculative fiction in Arabic, see Asaqli; Barbaro; Belkharouch; Khammas; Malik; Qasim; and Snir. For criticism on al-Ḥakīm's science fictional works, see Rani and Rudnicka.



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