**Seeking *Ilm* on the Silk Road**

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*Each atom reaches here through its own gate*

*Each takes a different road to gain this state*

*And what do you know of the Way before*

*You now, the path you’ll follow to His door?*

Farid ud-Din Attar, from ‘The Conference of the Birds’

translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis

*Who Himself and Others Knows*

*Here is rightly guided;*

*Occident and Orient*

*Are no more divided*

J.W. von Goethe, from ‘The West-Eastern Divan’

translation on display in the Museum of the History of Islamic

Science and Technology, Istanbul.

Informed in part by Farid Attar’s classic twelfth century Sufi poem ‘The Conference of the Birds’, I am currently writing a science fantasy novel about a young warrior woman’s voyage to a revolutionary commune in the desert. The third volume of *The Gaia Chronicles*, *The Blood of the Hoopoe* follows *Astra*, a *bildungsroman* in which the mixed race heroine discovers that her post-fossil fuel Mesopotamian paradise is built on lies, and *Rook Song*, in which the leaders of an uprising against her homeland decide she is the reincarnation of the goddess Istar. How did I, a white non-Muslim, come to be writing increasingly Islamic-flavoured science fiction? If I am not, in fact, guilty from the outset of cultural appropriation, how do I negotiate the minefield of my own ignorance and avoid reduplicating Orientalist stereotypes and Islamophobic tropes? May I, conversely dare to believe that my books might help create mutual understanding between cultures we are told are ‘at war’, even play a part in building, in place of violence and mistrust, a shared vision of a just and sustainable global society? These are questions of great ethical and aesthetic import and I am grateful for the opportunity to explore them here in *Critical Muslim*. My response traverses not only hotly contested political and literary debates, but spiritual beliefs and experiences that by their nature are difficult to fully express in words. What I can say with absolute certainty is that in writing these books I am educating myself, and attempting to educate others, about the richness of Muslim and other Middle Eastern cultures. Whether my novels succeed or fail in their more specific ambitions, so far writing them has given me a far greater appreciation of Islam.

I am, of course, by no means the first Western SFF writer to take a creative interest in the Middle East. As Paul Weimer has recently explicated, so-called ‘Silk Road Fantasy’, or Islamic SF written by non-Muslims, is a well-established subgenre; currently dominated by Elizabeth Bear it owes historical debts to Susan Shwartz, Judith Tarr, and the early twentieth century writer Harold Lamb, whose swashbuckling tales of Cossacks and Crusaders feature many fully realised Muslim protagonists. But while it may sound smooth and flowing, this Silk Road is riddled with pitfalls. Weimer warns against ‘slap-dash borrowing’ to cultivate an air of ‘mysticism and otherliness’, while Rebecca Hankins, discussing the use of Islamic tropes in the work of western SF authors including Brian Aldiss, Joanna Russ, and Michael Crichton, has observed that non-Muslim women writers in particular tend to take an Islamophobic approach to Muslim culture. I am the very opposite of antagonistic to Islam, but aware that cultural blind spots may lead me to get the simplest things spectacularly wrong, I am still sometimes amazed that I am attempting to walk the path at all.

Perhaps I am so conscious of the danger of cultural appropriation because I came-of-age in Canada in the eighties and nineties, at a time when First Nations people were vociferously challenging white writers’ use of their traditional stories. Their objection to such practices, as I understand it, is twofold. First Nations people have been subjected to a centuries long genocide, their land stolen and way of life destroyed by European invaders; for European Canadians to use and sell First Nations stories is simply to perpetuate the plunder. In addition, as Erin Hanson explains, indigenous Canadian tales belong to complex oral traditions in which formal rules govern who can tell a story, and when: they are subject to a cultural copyright as morally binding as the legal variety. I respect that copyright, and from those formative years I have also absorbed the general principle that as a member of an oppressor group I should not attempt to write in the voice of the oppressed. But while it is not hard to abide by this prohibition in my poetry, as a novelist it is a vexing one, and to me, increasingly calls for a nuanced response.

To me the novel is a magnificent form, and the greatest of challenges for a writer because it encompasses all aspects of human existence: feeling, thought, sensation, intuition, the lyric epiphany and the inexorable epic all fall within its compass. But how can novels reflect the extraordinary diversity of human experience if writers may only write from their own cultural or individual perspective? And if one of the great values of literature is its ability to generate empathy, why should writers, of whatever background, be prevented from exercising their own empathy in the creation of characters from all sides of a conflict? In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Khaled Hosseini demonstrates in devastating detail that a man can deeply understand the experience of brutalised women. Granted, cultural and linguistic gulfs may run deeper than gender divisions within an ethnicity, but still, with sufficient research, experience, and empathy it ought to be possible to write fiction which – even if only with gossamer – bridges those gaps in understanding and works to level those power imbalances. Politically engaged fiction, I believe, listens as much as it speaks. Rather than not attempt to write Silk Road Fantasy, I try to do so responsibly, respectfully and effectively: ultimately, to help de-Other the Other. Over time, I have developed four specific principles that guide me in this task. First, that in writing my novels I deepen my understanding of both myself and others in this complex and volatile world; second, that my research is as thorough as possible; third, that my creative writing is accompanied by activism toward the goals of a just peace in Israel-Palestine and a truly democratic, anti-racist West; and finally my books win the acceptance of at least some readers with cultural roots in the Middle East.

My first principle is the foundation of my entire creative practice, in which I take to heart the ancient Greek dictum ‘Know Thyself’. In researching and writing The Gaia Chronicles I inform myself about Islam, the Arab world and a wealth of other Middle Eastern cultures, and insofar as *The Gaia Chronicles* express my understanding of current conflicts and conversations between cultures and faiths, faith and science, people and power, the books represent my own intellectual, moral and emotional journey as much as my heroine’s. In order to build trust and avoid shallow declarations I wish to share some of that journey with readers, but before I do, it is fitting to set those details in the context of one of the core obligations of Islam: *ilm*, the duty, as Ziauddin Sardar explains it, to pursue and disseminate knowledge. Like my partner in these pages, Rebecca Hankins, I believe that *ilm* makes of Islam and science fiction natural cohabitants. Though it is absolutely true that good fiction must be dramatic, not didactic, one thing I love about SF is the gossamer steel platform it provides to explore ideas and share knowledge – not only of bioengineering and astrophysics, but also social and political science, history, philosophy and religion. Through weaving such research into my fiction, I hope to bring the Middle East a little closer to Western readers, and though my work, which also draws on the horror genre, can be unsettling, if it is able to engage Muslim free thinkers and convince them of my respect and admiration for the intellectual and moral underpinnings of their faith, I would feel I had truly accomplished something important. At the same time, directing *ilm* inward, to illuminate the Self, is not simply an individualistic Western goal. Attar, in the Prologue to his great allegorical poem about a party of birds who set forth on the long and arduous Way to Allah, echoes the classic Greek exhortation:

But as you haven’t lost a thing, don’t seek it!

And since your formulation’s wrong, don’t speak it

The things you seek and know are you, and so

It’s you, a hundred ways, you’re forced to know.

(Lines 98-101)

In the course of writing this essay I have considered deeply the question of how it is I came to be writing Middle Eastern SF and not, for example, Celtic fantasy or Tudor bodice rippers. I have realised that my journey into Islamic SF, has been years in the making, and began with almost imperceptible steps. Although I grew up without the benefit of much interaction with Muslim people, my formative experiences decisively pointed me in the direction I am now pursuing.

I was born in London in the sixties, to lapsed Christian parents: my father, a socialist and academic, is the son of a devout Anglican RAF widow, and my late mother, a poet, editor and creative writing teacher, was the great-granddaughter of a Scottish Presbyterian missionary in Calcutta (as was). I was brought up to cherish diversity; we had Hindu and Parsee family friends, my father’s work involved us in a multiracial community, and when his career took us to Hong Kong, my parents adopted my Chinese sister there. That is a whole other story, but whatever the arguments over interracial adoption, I can’t imagine life without my sister, and growing up with her made me as empathically aware as any white person can be, I think, of the deeply wounding nature of racism.My early years also contained one tantalising link to Muslim life: when I was four we returned to the UK to live in Liverpool, where I played on our street with a girl called Safia. But I recall very little of her, for this early attachment was not to last: when I was seven we moved to a small prairie city in Canada, and though my elementary school there is now an Islamic cultural centre, at the time I did not have Muslim schoolmates.

In Canada, though, in a move I now recognise as hugely influential upon my current interests, my parents joined the Quakers. Every Sunday I and my siblings would attend ‘children’s meeting’, playing cooperative board games and making handicrafts to donate to charities before joining the adults for ten minutes of wiggling on our bottoms in silence, followed by a potluck meal or skiing and mulled wine in the winter. I too abandoned organised religion, I absorbed values in those meetings that have never left me: the sense that there is an undimmable light in each one of us; that not even the hardest criminal is beyond redemption; and that spirituality involves action as well as contemplation, community as well as solitude. While there are of course profound differences between Quakerism and Islam, especially the relationship to scripture, it seems to me that there are also significant similarities between Quaker values and Muslim concepts, in particular *ummah*, the community; *adl*, which Sardar notes is an active requirement, meaning ‘distributive justice’; and above all *tawheed*, unity: for Quakers, shared silence allows communion with that divine love and truth that transcends and unites us all.

It was difficult, though, growing up in Canada, where church schools had abused First Nations pupils and robbed them of their families and language, to avoid the conclusion that Christianity was just another tool of the colonial regime. My burgeoning feminism also made traditional religious worship uncomfortable for me; visiting England in my early teens I ran sobbing from my paternal grandmother’s church, unable to bear for a moment longer all the old men in black gowns telling everyone what to do. My parents eventually left the Society of Friends, and when, after their divorce in my late teens, my mother became interested in mysticism, I was ripe for conversion myself. I began to explore alternative traditions: yoga, Buddhism, Tarot, astrology, shamanism; all the usual Western escape routes. I learned a great deal from all of them. After my mother’s untimely death, I had some startling experiences with psychics and mediums and, having resettled in the UK, for some years before returning to higher education I made a living as a Tarot Card reader. I became interested in my maternal Scot-Irish and paternal Norfolk heritage, and if not for Israel’s bombardment of Gaza in 2008-9, I might still be working on a verse novel about Boudica written in Norfolk dialect. But the horror of watching Operation Cast Lead on television triggered all my paternal political genes and, with the force of another conversion, reawakened my dormant Quaker drive toward activism.

I credit my father for the sense of inevitability that accompanied this new direction. As well as leaving the Manchester Guardian and New Internationalist strewn about the house, he had early on instilled in me sympathies for the Palestinian cause: when I was about seven he told me that while Israel was founded to give the Jews a refuge from persecution, this was done at the expense of the Palestinians who were forced to flee their homes. It was a brief explanation to a curious child but it made a lasting impression. In high school I contributed a passionate defense of the Palestinian cause to a student newspaper. This was an isolated act of solidarity, written in response to a piece by a young Zionist; I still didn’t know any Arabs or Muslims. After university, though, travelling in Greece during the first Gulf War, I was befriended by an older white South African woman and her Palestinian partner, who had recently escaped from a Syrian jail. Angela, holding court from a stool outside a clothes shop on the Acropolis, took my literary education in hand, insisting I read Jean Genet’s passionate defense of the Palestinians, *Prisoner of Love*; Mohammed, with his impeccable moustache and courteous English, escorted me round Athens to drink coffee with his Arab friends, all, like him, hoping and waiting for visas elsewhere. Later, I tried to help the couple get to Canada, and after a long hard story during which they separated, Mohammed eventually arrived in Montreal. I recalled all these experiences as, during Cast Lead I got involved in local demonstrations, and joined the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC). A year later I signed up for the Gaza Freedom March, which took place in Cairo, and on my return I co-founded British Writers in Support of Palestine, whose members pledge not to accept invitations from state-funded Israeli cultural and academic institutions.

I view the Israel-Palestine conflict not as a religious or ‘tribal’ war, but a human rights struggle against colonialism, apartheid and ethnic cleansing, and my political activism is only quietly motivated by spiritual beliefs. Through it, however, I have positively reconnected with organised religion. Though not initially taking an interest in Islam per se, I inevitably met Muslims and became more aware of the rise of Islamophobia in the UK. Working also with anti-Zionist Jews, I read about also on this topic, learning from Mike Marqusee and others of the potent history of radical Jewish social justice movements, and from Judith Butler of the centrality of justice to Jewish teachings.Over the years I have also reconciled with my Christian heritage. My aunt, still a High Anglican, has been a great role model of compassion and social responsibility, while as my mother loved the Christmas rituals, I celebrate the winter holiday in her memory. Now, in December, though I bristle at the image of Bethlehem on the cards, I also want to engage positively with Christians about it. In recent years I have organise political street theatre with a Christmas theme, started attending Midnight Mass with a Christian friend in my local PSC, rejoiced over the Bethlehem Unwrapped festival at St James Piccadilly. Though I still bridle at the gendered language of church services, and can’t embrace patriarchal monotheism, increasingly I respect the good that organised religion can accomplish: creating community, preaching mercy, humility, tolerance and co-operation. My vision of a just peace in Israel-Palestine is no longer an entirely secular one: while obviously a lasting solution to the conflict must be a democratic one that respects the basic human rights of all inhabitants, to reflect the unique character of the region I increasingly believe it must also – as so many interfaith peace activists find ways to do – honour the deep attachment of all three Abrahamic faiths to the Holy Land.

Given that over six decades of Zionist oppression is currently only getting worse, Islamic fundamentalists, fuelled by the fall-out of Bush and Blair’s crusade, are tearing apart the wider region, anti-Semitism is on the rise in Europe, and Western governments are still waging war on Muslims and their faith, the dream of any kind of peace in the Middle East may seem more unrealisable than ever before. But while I do not wish to create a false or glib equivalence between different cultures or religions, I am starting to believe that the Abrahamic faiths have more than sufficient common ground on which to found a lasting peace. It’s a big argument, resting in part on the growing and hugely controversial argument that Zionism is itself anti-Semitic, but in essence it seems to me that the many shared narratives and motifs of Islam, Judaism and Christianity remind us not only of the religions’ deeply shared historical roots but also their common values: truth, wisdom, justice, charity and love. Do not all three Abrahamic religions venerate Solomon, with his reward of the contested baby to the self-sacrificial, compassionate mother? While all religions can be guilty of sexism, xenophobia and violence against their own and others’ beliefs, a strong focus on their core shared values, also central to humanist thought, can feed the potential for peaceful co-existence. Historically, this potential has been realised far more often and more profoundly in the Middle East than in Europe. Muslim majorities have accepted Jewish communities far more readily than Christians have tolerated either of their sibling faiths, while the early Israelites took some time to become purist zealots: researching *The Blood of the Hoopoe*, I was fascinated to learn that Solomon was a tolerant pluralist who erected temples to the gods and goddesses of his many wives. Solomon, whom Muslims believe spoke the language of birds and animals, had a close relationship with the hoopoe: the marvellous bird was the King’s spy in the Queen of Sheba’s court, and also helped him build the First Temple without defying God’s stipulations, using a magic herb to cut stone without the use of iron tools – a legend thought to be the source of the magical injunction ‘open sesame.’ Currently echoing that call, the Open Bethlehem campaign, run by Palestinian Christian Leila Sansour, represents an invitation to people of all religions and none to help bring down the wall strangling not only the town of Jesus’s birth, but all of Palestine.

Midnight Mass notwithstanding, I personally am a non-religious believer in the possibility of transcendence. But as a creative writer I aim to ignite the basic fuel of both literature and religion: stories and symbols. Working on a PhD on the warrior woman in narrative verse, in 2010 I shifted my focus from Boudica to Inanna, the ancient Sumerian goddess of love and war. Goddess also of the morning and evening star, associated with Ishtar, Esther, Venus, Aphrodite, Persephone – and by extension Christ – Inanna is Solomon’s songwriter, Abraham’s diva grandmother. Pieced together by scholars from fragments of cuneiform tablets, and available now in English translations by Diane Wolkstein, hers are glorious, sensual stories of self-love in date palm orchards, a bold sea voyage to get her father drunk and steal his authority, a passionate marriage to the shepherd Dumuzi, considered beneath her, and a courageous journey to the underworld, where she is murdered by her own jealous sister Ereshkigal and brought back to life by the asexual spirits of compassion. Upon her return, Inanna learns that Dumuzi has usurped her throne, and their ensuing battle ultimately results in the creation of the seasons: in order to restore balance Dumuzi and his sister Geshtinnana must each spend half the year in the underworld with Ereshkigal. While the tablets are Iraqi treasures, Innana, who birthed the story of Eden and the great descent myths of so many traditions, belongs to the human psyche. She is a ‘missing archetype’: not just a warrior woman, but a leader whose courage and authority were inextricable from her sensuality and vulnerability. Her myths reminds us that leadership is not a male, but a human attribute, and that leaders worth respecting must be prepared to suffer, sacrifice, and grow.

For my PhD I submitted poems about contemporary Inannas and Persephones, including the Palestinian female suicide bomber Zainab Abu Salem, and an ex-IDF soldier I’d met in India. In 2011, for the Bush Theatre’s *66 Books* project, in which sixty-six writers responded to the King James Bible, I wrote a short verse drama set in contemporary Jerusalem, ‘The Strange Wife’, casting Ezra as an aged Zionist whose son had married a Palestinian. My poetic journey was interrupted, however, when my desk-drawer SF novel *Seoul Survivors* finally found a publisher in Jo Fletcher. My joy was tempered with panic: Jo wanted a second book, in a year. Immersed as I was in the Middle East, I couldn’t imagine dropping everything to write another cyber-chiller. Rather, I wanted my science fiction to extend my quest to educate myself about the Middle East. The positive response to ‘The Strange Wife’ encouraged me to take a huge leap down my own personal Silk Road and set my new novel in a parallel, futuristic Middle East. Increasingly concerned about climate change, I also wanted the novelto challenge what I perceived as an insular tendency in British Green politics: to confront the possibility of eco-catastrophe but respond with the vision of a more just and sustainable global society. An image arrived, of a small girl named Astra climbing a pine tree in pursuit of a wild child named Lil, and then, hot on their grubby little heels, a whole world came into focus . . .

That then, is how I came to write *The Gaia Chronicles*. Doing so has involved me in myriad ethical considerations. To explore the shared mythology of the Abrahamic religions in the context of climate change, I needed to set the book on a recognisable Earth, in a recognisably Middle Eastern location – a place I have never lived in, inhabited by people whose culture, languages and religion are not my own. The last thing I want to do is commit yet another act of Orientalist imperialism, yet I must accept that no matter how good my intentions, how detailed my research, I will inevitably make errors, expose unconscious bias, display my ignorance for all to see. For the reasons I have explained here, I feel the risks are worth taking. For one thing, how can we learn without making mistakes? Beyond that, I am not writing social realism. Though I would be horrified to peddle stereotypes or Islamophobic tropes, I do not feel I have to adhere slavishly to fact. Science Fiction and Fantasy engages the critical imagination in the task of creating alternative worlds a crucial remove from our own: *The Gaia Chronicles* are set in an imaginative space, not a geopolitically or even geographically correct one.

The series would take place, I decided, at a time when which runaway climate change has led to floods, disease, and the wholesale collapse of global society. During years of chaos, libraries burn, internet servers are bombed, rising sea levels change the very maps and the planet is radically depopulated. My futuristic world has suffered a traumatic forgetting, but it has also been shocked into realising the old world order must not be resurrected. At last a new world government, the Council of New Continents (CONC), is formed. CONC is idealistic, committed to democratic representation, enforceable international law, a fossil fuel ban and the elimination of war. But early on its members makes a fundamental error: in exchange for an invaluable nitrogen-fixing seed, they vote to allow the Gaians, an international community of radical Green eco-scientists and craftspeople, to create a ‘homeland’, Is-Land, in an abandoned region of Mesopotamia. In a re-greening of Eden, the Gaians clean the toxic land but then, on the grounds of protecting their own nudism and vegan lifestyles, refuse to allow the return of the original inhabitants. So far, so allegorical. As Marianne Moore said of poetry, ‘imaginary gardens need real toads’. My shamanic practices and early training in acting have strengthened my imagination; research and political engagement critically inform it, while my commitment to putting my own emotional toads into my futuristic world strengthens my empathy for my fictional characters.

Research has been paramount from the very beginning, both scholarly and experiential. I had a base of knowledge from my years of activism, but travel played a catalysing role in the creation of the novels’ setting. Though the pine tree in my opening image may have come straight out of the West Bank, I never wanted to re-write, or be seen to re-write, Israel-Palestine. As much as I oppose the conflation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, I didn’t want my work to get attention simply for becoming embroiled in that controversy. And I also didn’t remotely suggest that I was putting forward some kind of visionary solution to the conflict. Quite conversely, due to rising sea levels, it was likely that in my scenario Israel-Palestine would be a Mediterranean Atlantis. Discovering that *al-jazeera* means ‘island’ and is not only the name of the news channel, but also the land between the northern Tigris and Euphrates, I decided, as if struck by lightning, to visit South East Anatolia. En route, I visited Istanbul’s Museum of the History of Science and Technology, where long mesmerising halls of astrolabes, water clocks and constellation globes were introduced by the words of Goethe: here at the crossroads of continents it felt as though being a European seeker after *ilm* was not Orientalist appropriation but an essential intellectual quest the West had tragically lost sight of. Later, as a Canadian prairie girl wandering through Diyarbakir, I felt both a humble visitant and at home: not just in the rolling steppes, but in the daily routines of a small rural city, albeit one populated by Turks, Kurds, and Arabs and surrounded by an ancient basalt wall. Although, as the guidebook warned, I was harassed more than anywhere else I’ve ever been, I was also incredibly welcomed by mini-bus drivers, students, old women and a waiter who went into raptures when he saw what I was reading: the poetry of Kurdish writer Bejan Matur, who later kindly provided the epigraph to *Astra*. As I blogged at the time, the trip, followed by my first visit to Israel-Palestine, was stimulating and strangely reassuring. Upon my return I began writing *Astra*, basing the topography of Is-Land on South East Anatolia, though that soon changed.

Exploring Astra’s warped Eden, with its multi-racial eco-community and excluded indigenous peoples, I soon realised that I was also writing about myself: a European child playing in Canada’s national parks while First Nations people struggled to survive; a quarter Celt with England, Scotland and Ireland crossing swords in her veins; a great-great-granddaughter of the Raj whose interracial family is still a vector for British imperialism, and resistance to it. Both the map of Is-Land and the book’s narrative trajectory evolved to reflect these more personal and more international concerns. If *The Gaia Chronicles* is an allegory, it is a multidimensional one, Astra through the looking glass, refracting psychological, personal and political realities through which I attempt, as Goethe urged, to know both myself and many others. For while Astra’s eco-fascist world holds Abrahamic religions at arms-length, and nothing in *The Gaia Chronicles* is exactly as it is here, in *Rook Song* and subsequent volumes readers will recognise Muslim, Jewish, Arab Christian, Kurdish, Iranian and other Middle Eastern cultures and religions. The regional languages of Non-Land are Asfarian, Somarian, Karkish, and Farashan, for which, to evoke both the historic and mythical past, I’ve drawn on Arabic, Sumerian, Aramaic and ancient Persian. Learning about all these cultures is a massive, humbling task. I am taking things slowly, each book reflecting new levels of research and insight.

Take, for example, headscarves. The leader of the Non-Land Alliance, Una Dayyani, is a secular Somarian – Una means ‘victory’ in ancient Sumerian, Dayyani ‘judge’ – and doesn’t cover, but her Karkish personal assistant Marti does, and encourages Una to do so to win respect in Karkish circles. Appropriating a contemporary emblem of male leadership, Una prefers a gold turban. This is by no means a scenario I could have written a decade ago. I didn’t grow up surrounded by women in *hijab* or *niqab*, even as a Palestinian solidarity worker in Brighton, I don’t see them frequently, and without knowing anyone who wore it, for years I felt uneasy about both garments, let alone the *burqa*. When I visited Dubai in 2001, staying with a New Zealander EFL teacher and reading Tarot cards to her friends in her flat, I was seriously discomforted by the *niqab* worn by the market stallholders: with its copper nose shield it seemed to me like a cage. Perhaps that reaction is a form of Islamophobia, but in my defense covering is a hot debate topic between Muslim feminists, and I had never generalised my qualms into any kind of ultimate dismissal of Islam – my feminist criticisms of Christianity were far stronger. And rather than feeling hostile to women who covered, I was angry at the double standard: if covering the face, in particular, was a sign of immense piety, I thought, why shouldn’t male Muslims, especially those in positions of spiritual authority do it? With this resentful mindset, I couldn’t even see the *hijab* in an entirely positive light.

Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow* first began to convert me to pro-covering arguments, but it was my ten days in Egypt that completely transformed my attitude toward headscarves. Surrounded by Egyptian women in *hijab* I saw within a day both the euro-centricity of my discomfort - Western women generally cover our chests, after all, while men are free to go topless - and the charm and versatility of the garment: by the end of my visit I was asking a young woman in the all-female subway car to show me how to wrap my new pashmina like hers – perhaps a frivolous request, but she seemed delighted to oblige. Now, though I think it is important to see a person’s face in certain situations – trials, for example – I understand that choosing to cover is a powerful way to express identity and faith, and strongly believe that when Westerners narrowly focus debate about Islam on women’s dress we demean women’s choices and disrespect a different cultural and spiritual tradition. Muslim women themselves are best placed to debate and improve the position of women in Islam. And surely non-Muslims can find ways to relate to the garments and customs not so far from our own? Now, reading Nnedi Okorafor, whose Afrofuturist novels feature young West African heroines moving between Muslim and magico-shamanic traditions, I can smile at her depiction of the *burqa* as an invisibility cloak. I think back too, to my Liverpool friend Safia. Whether because her family were Christian, or in an act of inclusivity and respect for the brown skins of the Biblical characters, she was chosen to play Mary in our school nativity, and this year when the Facebook meme ‘Mary wore *hijab*’ circulated, I fondly recalled the photograph of her in a blue headdress and robe holding the baby doll Jesus.

Overall, I try to read widely. From Shereen El Feki’s *Sex and the Citadel* I learned about temporary marriage – a phrase I had heard in the context of refugee camps and had thought a euphemism for prostitution or sex slavery. It was a revelation to learn that it is in fact a sanctioned practice, and though often abused, can also be beneficial to women. The *Syria* issue of *Critical Muslim*, the *Syria Speaks* anthology, news articles about the toxic waste afflicting Gaza and Fallujah, have kept me close to the multiple horrors perpetuated in Middle East, seemingly ever-escalating violence that haunts *The Gaia Chronicles*; at the same time articles on Islamic environmentalism encourage me to continue imagining a future that draws on Muslim and other traditional wisdoms. I’m still at the start of my journey into Islamic SF, indeed SF; on the whole I relate more strongly to hybrid genres, such as employed by Emil Habiby in his autobiographical fantasy *Saraya: The Ogre’s Daughter*. But that means there is much to look forward to. Reading Yusuf Nuruddin discuss Ishmael Reed’s *The Earth Chronicles*, it intrigued me to learn that my novels converse with that sprawling classic of urban American resistance literature. More than SF, though, right now I feel that I need to acquaint myself with Islam itself. And the more I read about the religion, here in *Critical Muslim*, in essays by Ziauddin Sardar, in Attar’s spry urgings, the more beauty I find in it. I can’t imagine converting, but perhaps in literature there is room for a non-Abrahamite to enter into Islam’s conceptual space.

It’s not enough, though, just to write. Writing from the comfort and safety of a Brighton flat about an uprising of disabled people in a futuristic Middle East, is a privilege that must be earned by work to challenge injustice and alleviate immediate suffering. Though writing novels to deadlines is time-intensive (and so far not wildly lucrative), I engage in as much political activity as I can. Activism also keeps me in touch with informed and sympathetic readers, leading to deeper discussions of the issues I am grappling with, greater leaps in my learning and renewed confidence in my project. My desire to create a Palestinian bibliography for BWISP, for example, led me to Andy Simons, then at the British Library, who invited me to appear at the 2104 Tottenham Palestine Literature Festival. There, my panel discussion on Middle Eastern SFF with Rebecca Hankins (AKA Ruqayyah Kareem) and Yasmin Khan, producer of Sindbad Sci-Fi, led directly to this collaborative article while Yasmin’s enthusiasm for my project got me dreaming of launching an Islamic steampunk novel at Brighton Pavilion . . .

I must be clear, though. I’m not setting myself the task of imagining a future for Islam – that would be arrogant and absurd. What I’m trying to do is appreciate and share Muslim culture and ideas, to educate myself and others. I am also writing fiction, not a manifesto. As fiction the novels dramatise conflict, violence and sex. My treatment of these themes make some non-Muslims uncomfortable, and the more I engage with Islamic tropes, the more I may risk offending Muslims too. That is certainly not something I intend. When I write about sex or horror I am not aiming to offend anyone. I am simply trying to present my characters as fully embodied human beings living in a world that is often violent and confusing. *Je ne suis pas Charlie*, though: I would never intentionally disrespect the Prophet. As has been argued, post-Paris, by Ziauddin Sardar andYasmin Alibhai Brown, among other media commentators, what needs to be criticised in Islam is not the love of Muslims for Mohammed, but the abuse, distortion and manipulation of the Qur’an by power-hungry clerics, and the resultant suspicion of free thinking amongst Western Muslims as much as any other. I hope this essay conveys my excitement about my own on-going engagement with Islam. While the challenge of representing diverse global communities is immense, it feels to me that social inclusivity is one of the most important goals of our times. Silken, rocky, thorny, paved in gold or tar - our paths all cross, and beneath us the Earth is dangerously rumbling. If we are to avoid unparalleled destruction, new frameworks of knowledge must emerge, capacious and flexible enough to hold us all while respecting our differences, pragmatic and yet visionary enough to help us jointly solve the challenges we face as a species on a planet with a finite capacity to sustain us. I don’t know if Occident and Orient can become ‘one’, or if that is even a desirable outcome; it is my perhaps wild dream, however, that science fiction can help us envision a better future than the one to which our current global leaders are steering us, one in which humanity’s collective wisdom becomes the wellspring of our moral and social evolution.

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