



The Literary Qur'an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb

by Hoda El Shakry, New York, Fordham University Press, 2020

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To cite this article: yasser elhariry (2021): The Literary Qur'an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb, The Journal of North African Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13629387.2021.1888611](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2021.1888611)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2021.1888611>



Published online: 16 Feb 2021.



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BOOK REVIEW

The Literary Qur'an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb, by Hoda El Shakry, New York, Fordham University Press, 2020

Hoda El Shakry's *The Literary Qur'an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb* represents an incisive intervention in the fields of Arabic and francophone studies. El Shakry opens by lambasting 'the geopolitical, philological, and ideological divisions that silo Arabophone and Francophone literatures' (3). As Wail Hassan once observed, the most insidious aspect of these divisions lingers in the

fact that Arabic literature of French expression by Maghrebian and Levantine writers is routinely incorporated in Francophone studies, housed as it is on the margin of the French curriculum (and is therefore part of 'postcolonialism'), rather than in Arabic or Middle Eastern Studies, where literature by their Arabophone compatriots is studied, often with little attention to colonial history (Hassan 2002).

El Shakry goes further, stressing that such disciplinary orders and orderings actually 'draw attention to Maghrebi studies' asymmetrical distribution of literary value across the false binary of "secular" Francophone and "religious" Arabophone literary traditions' (3).

El Shakry's solution proposes no less than undertaking the daunting task of altogether desecularizing critique, which she goes about in several ways. She works through 'Edward Said's notoriously slippery concept of secular criticism in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*', which 'appears to inflect secularism with an antireligious tone', in order to 'theoriz[e] the Qur'an as a literary intertext' that 'functions as an ethical mode/l of knowledge production [and] fosters critical reading practices' (10). Parting ways with Said, El Shakry looks instead to Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood's trailblazing work, which 'provide[s] a valuable corrective to the influence of the secularization narrative on contemporary literary criticism', especially since 'the privileging of secularism as the engine of cultural modernity is deeply embedded within taxonomies of narrative practices and forms, particularly the novel' (11).

Most importantly, the project of de-siloing and desecularizing critique of the Maghreb's literary production unfolds through the very structure of *The Literary Qur'an* itself. El Shakry divides her book across three parts that pair 'canonical Francophone and lesser-known Arabophone novels (from the 1940s to 1980s)', providing a convincing and much-needed methodology for 'confront[ing] the disciplinary impasses of Maghrebi studies' (3). The sections trace a westward swerve that goes from Tunisia to Algeria to Morocco, which in turn gestures toward networks of literary circulation between the Maghreb, Egypt, and France (for instance, Egyptian intellectuals and French receptions of Maghrebi literature are invoked throughout the book, providing plenty of helpful contextualisation). In the section devoted to Tunisia, 'Poetics of Piety', El Shakry explores

Sufi poetics in Maḥmūd al-Masʿadī's *Mawlid al-nisyān* [The Genesis of Forgetfulness] (1945) when read alongside Abdelwahab Meddeb's *Talismano* (1979). In 'Ethics of Embodiment', she 'theorize[s] Muslim ethics amid the fraught ethnolinguistic tensions of (post)colonial Algeria' (29) in al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭar's *al-Zilzāl* [The Earthquake] (1974) and Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* [Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade] (1985). Finally, in 'Genealogies of Transmissions', Driss Chraïbi's *Le Passé simple* [The Simple Past] (1954) and Muḥammad Barrāda's *Lu'bat al-nisyān* [The Game of Forgetting] (1987) take centre stage in showing how 'Qur'anic intertextuality and narratology [...] challenge periodizations of (post-)modernity' (29) in Morocco. Each chapter within *The Literary Qur'an's* narrative arc introduces and situates the authors within the Maghreb's layered sociopolitical landscape, before expertly guiding the reader through erudite close readings of the novels in relation to the Qur'ān, the hadith, and the Islamic theological traditions. Indeed, one of the book's strongest scholarly contributions is the impressive groundwork laid out by the author in the footnotes, where she provides the foundations for her excursus into Islamic *madhāhib*, the principles of *taṣawwuf*, and concepts such as *adab* and the *nahḍa*.

Over the course of *The Literary Qur'an*, El Shakry artfully raises quite a number of important questions. For instance, one thinks of the contemporary moment (like France right now) when she describes her reading of Islam 'as an intrinsically critical practice that cultivates ethical modes of subjectivity in the pursuit of knowledge' (15), or the question of the prophet Muḥammad's illiteracy, or the history of the Qur'ān itself and the very basic (if evasive) issue of revelation. In an extension of the strain of historical revisionism encountered in Assia Djebar's *Loin de Médine* [Far from Madina] (1991), El Shakry's writing impels the reader to question the hegemonic historiographic narratives of early Islam. She prods critical, narrative speculation. *What if* – rather than framing the Qur'ān as revelation, or thinking of Muḥammad's companions as memorisers of the suras – we were to think of early Islam as a school of poetics, comprised of a master poet surrounded by apprentices? And what of the long gestation period (40 years of age at the time of the first revelation) during which Muḥammad was more than likely learning about other traditions?

Throughout these questionings, one thing strikes the reader above everything else: El Shakry's committed engagement with the Qur'ān as intertext or ur-text for the Maghrebi novel. As evident as it seems in retrospect, such a reading of the Qur'ān had not yet been argued or articulated in such a cogent, sustained fashion in either Arabic or francophone studies. While clear Arabic-language models for poetry abound (as most recently in the work of Sayed Elsisī, Huda Fakhreddine, and Lara Harb), few come as close to the novel as *The Literary Qur'an*. The book suggests that the Maghrebi novel is a project of infinitely extending, or delaying, or tarrying, or dwelling in the incompleteness of the Arabic novel, which stems from El Shakry's implicit claim that the Qur'ān is an Arabic novel. The Maghrebi novels that she groups amount to a project – not of re-writing – but of continuing to write the Qur'ān. And so El Shakry altogether does away with poetry in favour of the novel. She explains that

the genres of poetry or the short story would be more obvious choices were I concerned simply with questions of cultural autochthony. The novel lends itself to comparative analysis with the Qur'an, insofar as both operate at the scale of narrative totality and world-building while also fostering close textual readings (3).

She argues for the importance of the novel over poetry for the express purpose of rehabilitating Islam and Islamic texts as narrative mode/Is. She stresses that

the iterability of the Qur'an serves both a discursive and an ethical function. On the one hand, it is a literary intertext and mode/I of hermeneutic analysis. On the other, in order to fully engage with the Qur'an – as both a practitioner and reader – it must be inhabited, embodied, and performed (12).

Yet the inhabitation, embodiment, and performance of the novel in relation to the Qur'an, in the Maghrebi modernist and postmodernist moments, have been construed as belated by scholarship. 'Frequently read through the lens of belated modernity', El Shakry writes, 'the Arab/ic novel is often treated as an adaption of the European genre – whereby "universal" literary form is imbued with "local" content' (14). Echoing Giorgio Agamben's prophetic tone in his definition of contemporariness in terms of belatedness and untimeliness, El Shakry suggests that a large part of the Arabic novel's supposed belatedness has to do with how 'the Qur'an's introduction in the seventh century challenged the then-reigning dominance of poetry as the literary form par excellence', which then becomes coupled with 'the theological doctrine of *ijāz al-qur'ān*' or 'the Qur'an's inimitability' (20). She furthermore reminds the reader of Tāha Ḥusayn's amazing book *Fī al-shī'r al-jāhili* [On Jāhili Poetry] (1926), and his provocation that pre-Islamic poetry was actually a post-Qur'anic fabrication or fib, a sort of early Islamic literary hoax.

If poetry thus falls out of favour – and poetry has never really ever been in favour or in anyone's good graces when all one need to do is think of Plato's *Republic*, or *sūrat al-Shu'arā'*, or Sir Philip Sidney in the Elizabethan age, or the Pléiade poets in the French Renaissance, or the dearth of Enlightenment poetry, or the 'inadmissibility' of poetry in mid-twentieth-century France by Denis Roche, or Ben Lerner's book on *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016) in 21st-century America – what we have, then, is a curious instance of poetry-masquerading-as-novel in the form of the Qur'an. El Shakry expounds upon this in useful overviews of Qur'anic aesthetics, the history of its reception, how it has long baffled Orientalists and continues to baffle the West to this day (20–24), while in her close readings she frequently dwells upon the Qur'an's nonlinear, nonchronological structure in relation to the Maghrebi novel.

By tirelessly seeking and unearthing the Islamic and Maghrebi substratum of Western civilisation, *The Literary Qur'an* partakes of a massive, if slow, gradual process of peeling away at the skin, of skinning, of flaying the West, or what El Shakry describes as that which has been 'largely overwritten by European orientalist scholarship, which sought to secularize the concept of *adab*' (20). She tellingly follows this by saying a few pages later that

the impulse to narratively tame the Qur'an is particularly relevant when considering the periodization of literary modernity within an antitheological ontology. Critiques and revisionist rewritings of the Qur'an discount qualities such as multivocality, nonlinearity, asynchronicity, and narrative code-switching – the very aesthetic stylizations privileged in (post)modernist writing (24).

If I am to follow El Shakry's thinking to its extreme limits, to where she says the unsaid, to where I hear the unheard, the way I read *The Literary Qur'an* tells me that the Qur'an is not only a novel, but that it is still being written. It is either the greatest literary work because it will never be finished, or the greatest literary hoax of all because it never happened. Because this is kept latent throughout the book, El Shakry productively operates within a mode of sacred secrecy, clandestine transference, vocal whispers, what the Qur'an would call *waswasa*. Giving herself away, she quotes a revealing passage from Maḥmūd al-Mas'ādī.

What happens between the literary work and its reader in terms of interaction, impact, and influence – on the affective level and the intellectual, imaginative, or philosophical level – is a secret known only to the reader, because the reader is not subject to laws like those of chemistry. For this reason, we speak of the alchemy beyond chemistry, rather than of chemistry [alone]. This secret is not subject to the laws of nature but is instead a strange matter from which every literary work is born (qtd. 56).

A comment made by the late Lebanese poet Salah Stétié sheds light on how al-Mas'ādī's mystical literary alchemy translates into theoretical terms for the reader of a literary work. Evocative of Maurice Blanchot, Stétié posits that

all reading is ultimately a semi-dialogue or half-monologue. Through the other's words, it redirects the reader back to their own altered voice. And because the reader's voice is blended with the other voice and metamorphosed by it, all reading, in the end, is the capture of a non-voice, which, projected into space (does one not speak of the vocal space?), is a *non-place* (Stétié 2006).

El Shakry's book shows us how the Maghrebi novel, by seriously taking on the massive burden of continuing to write the Qur'an, very much transports us to that literary non-place. Isn't that, ultimately, what any literary Qur'an should do?

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2021.1888611>

