

The Literary Qur'an

NARRATIVE ETHICS IN THE MAGHREB

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INTRODUCTION

The Quʾran as (Inter)text: Embodiment, Praxis, Critique

وَلَوْ أَنَّ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَامٌ وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ
سَبْعَةُ أَبْحُرٍ مَا نَفِدَتْ كَلِمَاتُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

And if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea [were ink], with seven [more] seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted: for, verily, God is almighty, wise.

(QURʾAN 31:27 TRANS. ASAD)

Literary scholars have long noted Goethe's fascination with Islam and the influence of the Qur'an—which Goethe had access to in English (Sale), French (Du Ryer), and German (Arnold and Megerlin)—on his theories of literary creation, circulation, and translation.¹ He read and compared multiple translations of the Qur'an, even citing suras in his personal correspondences and diaries. Goethe's insights in *Divan* (1819) on poetic prophecy and the relationship between the worldly and the divine, as well as the literary and the theological, centered on the figure of the Prophet Muhammad—who was also the protagonist of his unfinished play *Mahomet*. He began working on the sympathetic portrayal of the Prophet while translating Voltaire's incendiary 1736 play *Le fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète* (Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet) into German.² In other words, Islam, and the Qur'an specifically, inspired Goethe's understanding of literary archetypes, systems, and relations within his theorization of *Weltliteratur*.³

Yet, the Qur'an has largely been absent from disciplinary debates in the field of world literature and has only recently garnered sustained critical attention.⁴ This lacuna speaks to the broader oversight of Islam in Euro-American literary studies, as well as the canonization of particular models

of secular reading—by which I mean the occlusion of religious epistemes, practices, and intertexts.⁵ While scholars of world literature may only just be discovering “the Qur’an’s fundamentally comparative nature,” it has long served as a literary exemplar and intertext across a diverse range of literary traditions (Damrosch 4).⁶ Interrogating the relationship between the Qur’an and narrative calls attention to the differential valuation of literary and critical reading practices. It compels us to critically reexamine not only conceptual binaries of the secular/religious but also questions of methodology (close/distant reading), genre (literature/theory), and discipline (area studies/comparative and world literature).

This study does not intend to advance a totalizing theory of the relationship between religion and literature; nor to mold the Qur’an’s multivalent narrative traditions into a generalizable world literature methodology. *The Literary Qur’an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb* interrogates how the Qur’an—that is, its formal, narrative, and rhetorical qualities as a text, as well as its attendant embodied practices and hermeneutical strategies—enriches our understanding of literary sensibilities and practices in the context of the Maghreb. My use of the term “ethics” refers to Islam’s intersecting moral and epistemological dimensions, in which the critical pursuit of knowledge is inseparable from the spiritual cultivation of the self. At once in dialogue with and against the grain of debates surrounding secularism, secular critique, and postsecularism, I read critique as intrinsic to the very practice of Islam as a philosophical, intellectual, and spiritual tradition.⁷

Redirecting our attention to the narrative possibilities embedded within and afforded by theological discourse, this study explores how the Qur’an models and invites *critical* modes of textual and embodied engagement. To that end, my reading of Islam bridges critical hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology. The former speaks to a methodology of active critical interpretation that accounts for semiotic ambiguity and multivocality, while simultaneously attending to broader ideological concerns.⁸ Meanwhile, hermeneutic phenomenology detranscendentalizes fixed notions of truth by moving from description to interpretation as an inherently phenomenological experience of the world, consciousness, and knowledge.

Foregrounding questions of form and praxis, *The Literary Qur’an’s* organizational logic echoes my reading of the Qur’an as a textual object and literary intertext. The book is structured around a series of pairings that invite paratactic readings across texts, languages, and literary canons. Each section highlights a conceptual node in the book’s broader theorization of narrative ethics in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco—I: “Poetics of Piety”; II: “Ethics of Embodiment”; and III: “Genealogies of Transmission.” Re-

flecting both critical methodology and argument, the pairing of canonical Francophone and lesser-known Arabophone novels (from the 1940s to 1980s) further confronts the disciplinary impasses of Maghrebi studies. Disrupting the geopolitical, philological, and ideological divisions that silo Arabophone and Francophone literatures, these pairings reveal the multilingual and polysemic nature of Maghrebi literature both across and within languages. This draws attention to Maghrebi studies' asymmetrical distribution of literary value across the false binary of "secular" Francophone and "religious" Arabophone literary traditions.

This book's comparative praxis is staged rather than explicated: paired works appear in autonomous side-by-side chapters, each of which is committed to the practice of close reading. This marks a methodological divergence from the largely antiformalist tendencies of world literature and postcolonial criticism, which tend to rely upon critical distance and world-systems or networked readings. My attentiveness to form, however, is not intended to obscure the multitudinous forces and actors that shape Maghrebi cultural formations. By including the Francophone canon and focusing on the novel, this study confronts the ideological biases that have shaped the Maghreb as an epistemic object. 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.

My close readings across this book call attention to literature as a site in which the process of entextualization occludes ethical practices. To read ethics back into literature, I argue, one must attend to narrative, citational, and hermeneutical practices that have largely been disciplined out of Euro-American literary studies and canon formation. My analysis builds upon a vast body of Islamic scholarship that blends together literary and theological methodologies, conceptual vocabularies, and reading practices. In their intertextuality with the Qur'an and Islamic philosophy, the novels in this study disrupt the bifurcation of secular and religious discourses. Their intertextuality relies upon an understanding of the fundamental *literariness* of the Qur'an, and inversely, the ethical imperative of literature more broadly. These works are not simply citing from a fixed corpus or heteronomous tradition; rather, I argue that they work dialogically with the development of Islam's polyvalent textual practices. Returning to my discussion of the sura "Al-'alaq" in the Preface, the Qur'an's narrativity encompasses a range of aesthetic and ethical practices that mobilize the faculties of the mind and the body. This includes the Qur'an's formal qualities (linguistic reg-

ister, code-switching, polyphony) as well as hermeneutical and embodied practices (memorization, recitation, transcription, citation) associated with scripture as a model for spiritual life.

The Literary Qur'an challenges the prominence of postcolonial approaches to the study of the Maghreb by examining how its writers at once theorize and cultivate forms of cultural capital that move beyond the binary of “cultural authenticity” and “colonial mimicry.” There is a tendency to treat “theory and method . . . as naturally metropolitan, modern, and Western,” whereas formerly colonized states are interpellated through “the idiom of cases, events, examples, and test sites in relation to this stable location for the production or revision of theory” (Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination” 4). This book is part of a broader critical effort to *theorize from below*—namely, to decentralize Euro-American historical frameworks, periodizations, and critical methodologies mobilized in the study of non-Western cultural practices and forms. This informs my own close reading practices, in addition to the book’s theoretical scaffolding—which extracts a model of narratology and poesis from the Qur’an.

The critical framework of narrative ethics brings together and expands upon the concepts of *adab*, *ijtihād*, and poesis. Before the term was secularized in its codification as “literature” during the late nineteenth century, *adab* signaled the genre of belles lettres, as well as the moral dimensions of personal and social conduct. Meanwhile, *ijtihād* refers to the practice of individual “reasoning independent of precedent” within Islamic jurisprudence and Muslim spiritual life more broadly (Haj 9). Poesis, or *shā’irīyya/shi’rīyya*, alongside the concept of *ibdā’* (creation, innovation, or creativity), speak to the artistic drive as an ethical act of creation—one that I read as intimately tied to Muslim subject formation.

The lens of *adab* brings questions of pedagogy, embodiment, and ethics into dialogue with theorizations of literature, literariness, and critical reading. Islamic pedagogy—at both madrasas (Qur’anic schools) and institutions of higher education that specialize in Islamic studies, such as al-Zaytūna (Tunisia), al-Qarawīyyin (Morocco), and the Ben Bādīs Institute (Algeria)—is crucial to understanding the influence of the Qur’an on the literary figures in this book. These institutions were foundational to the intellectual formation of Maḥmūd al-Mas’adī, Abdelwahab Meddeb, al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār, Assia Djebar, Driss Chraïbi, and Muḥammad Barrāda. From the study of the Qur’an, hadith, *tafsīr* (exegesis), to the fields of Islamic philosophy, jurisprudence, and history, these courses of study generated a shared vocabulary and intellectual archive within a particular model of Islamic

education and edification. In the context of this study, Islam represents a multivalent set of beliefs and habits that are inextricably linked to social and cultural practices. The works examined in this book reflect diverse interpretations and articulations of Islam and therefore do not subscribe to a singular political project or ideological orientation.

In what follows, I begin by outlining the history of the Maghreb as it pertains to the methodological orientation of Maghrebi studies, particularly around the bifurcation of Francophone and Arabophone literatures. Arguing for the multilingual accenting of Maghrebi literature both within and across languages, I connect the lack of critical attention to Qur'anic intertextuality to the privileging of Francophone works. Turning to the question of secular criticism, I expound my mobilization of the term "critique" in relation to the Qur'an. I engage scholarship in the anthropology of Islam in order to parse out the ways in which the term "secular" is often deeply inflected by its own orthodoxies. I then consider how the secularization narrative has impacted the study of literary forms and practices, especially the genre of the novel. I propose that the concept of *adab* provides a valuable corrective, by offering a more generative and inclusive model of literature. I subsequently bring in both historical and current debates within Qur'anic studies on the narrative, stylistic, and literary dimensions of the Qur'an. From Qur'anic aesthetics I turn to how Qur'anic hermeneutics and Sufi poetics can be mobilized in literary criticism. Theorizing the Qur'an as a literary object, process, and model, I argue, introduces ethical ways of approaching questions of writing, reading, and literary hermeneutics.

Imagining the Maghreb

In his 1983 work *Maghreb pluriel*, Moroccan novelist and literary critic Abdelkébir Khatibi (1938–2009) theorizes "the Maghreb as a horizon of thought" (*le Maghreb comme horizon de pensée*), arguing that it "self-globalizes" because of its ethnolinguistic diversity and geopolitical location on the threshold of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (38–39).⁹ Beyond problematizing West-(Arab) East trajectories of cultural modernity, intellectuals like Khatibi have long theorized the Maghreb as a linguistically unstable site.¹⁰ Maghrebi literature for them is not only multilingual but is polysemically accented within any given language.¹¹ Both Arabophone and Francophone Maghrebi literatures disrupt essentialist narratives of decolonization in which Arabic signifies the language of origin and return. In fact, much of twentieth-century Maghrebi literature problematizes the

relationship between Arab ethnic identity, the Arabic language, and Islam. Some writers in this study, such as Assia Djebar, have even framed the Maghreb's Arabization and Islamicization as a colonial project akin to Ottoman, Spanish, and French imperialism. Others, like Abdelwahab Meddeb and Driss Chraïbi, uncouple Islam from the Arabic language in order to disrupt their imbricated codification within postindependence nationalist discourse.

The Maghreb is a particularly rich site for exploring the Qur'an and literature, insofar as its fiction denaturalizes Arabic as the privileged currency of both Arab cultural capital and Islam. This is particularly the case with Francophone Maghrebi literature in which the Qur'an functions as both a literary intertext and a textual object mediated through its circulation in translation. The obfuscation of Qur'anic intertexts in critical literature on the Maghreb can be read in relation to the region's complex colonial histories and their impact on cultural, linguistic, and literary practices, as well as the periodization of Arab cultural modernity within narratives of the *nahḍa*, or Arab cultural awakening.

The Maghreb is a geopolitical as well as an imagined space, the contours of which have been defined by a series of interconnected historiographical, ideological, and colonial narratives.¹² Both etymologically and geopolitically, the Maghreb (from *gh-r-b*, or "to set") is structurally interdependent with the Mashriq (from *sh-r-q*, or "to rise"), used to designate the countries east of Egypt. The term began circulating with the spread of Islam around the seventh century, when it was mobilized to indicate the westernmost territories that were subject to the expansion of the Arab-Islamic empire. It acquired another connotative layer in its adoption by French imperialist discourse to indicate their territories in the region: Algeria as a settler colony (1830–1962), Tunisia as a protectorate (1881–1956), and Morocco as a protectorate (1912–1956). Unlike the anachronism "Indochine," however, "the Maghreb" is a term still in active circulation, in both Arabic and French, across academic as well as civil society contexts. As such, it brings to the fore the complex relationship between the Maghreb as the final frontier for the Islamization as well as Arabization of the region, and as a repository for the French imperial imagination.

While in its transnational circulation the term "Maghreb" encompasses Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, it has a broader signification in the Arabic context, where it can include Libya and Mauritania. The Arab Maghreb Union (Ittiḥād al-Maghrib al-'Arabī), for example, was ratified by Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Mauritania in 1989. Created as a forum for postindependence economic and political cooperation, the union was

centered around pan-Arab identity—suggesting a very different mode of transnational affiliation than the (post)colonial Francophone Maghreb.¹³ This study follows the French-accented “Maghreb” in order to historicize and trouble its relationship to Islamicization, French imperialism, and decolonization. That said, I am sensitive to the ways in which these discrepant investments are replicated in the critical biases of Maghrebi studies scholarship. As the structure of this book—pairing canonical Francophone novels with lesser-known Arabophone ones—reflects both method and argument, my use of the term “Maghreb” is delimited by the very politics of canon formation.

The French colonial civilizing mission (*mission civilisatrice*) entailed a drastic reconfiguration of the social, cultural, and economic constitution of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Practices such as the enforcement of the French language in education, government, and public-sector spheres irrevocably impacted cultural production in the region. This influenced the language politics of Arabic and indigenous Berberophone languages under French occupation, as well as in the aftermath of independence.¹⁴ The “language question,” as it came to be known, was propelled by colonial efforts to control the region, in addition to postindependence attempts to unify the Maghreb under the signifiers Arab and Muslim.

The cultural Arabization of the Maghreb occurred in concert with its Islamicization—both during the expansion of Islam and as part of the consolidation of national identity upon independence. Moreover, French colonial policies differentially racialized and governed indigenous Berberophone populations, Arab Jews, and Arab Muslims. The dichotomy between Arab Muslims and Kabyles/Berbers, for example, was manipulated by the colonial state to insidious political ends in what is referred to as *le mythe Kabyle*. Historian James McDougall notes that “an elaborate system of oppositions was contrived between ‘Arabs’ and ‘Kabyles,’ with the former generally denigrated as civilizationally unimprovable, the latter as ‘closer to Europe’ in race, culture, and temperament” (“Myth and Counter-Myth” 67).¹⁵ These narratives not only informed divisive colonial policies and subsequent nationalist persuasions, but they further influenced how questions of religion, ethnic identity, and language shaped Maghrebi cultural practices.¹⁶

Crucially, French colonial policies separated the Islamic courts and legal systems from state institutions in ways that essentially privatized religious practices. Subsequent postindependence legal reforms—such as the largely Sunni Mālikī *mudawwana* personal status code ratified in Morocco in 1956—merged precolonial models of jurisprudence with nationalist

agendas, often overwriting colonial policies of legal pluralism. French legal codes, for example, accounted for Berber customary law under the 1930 Berber *dahir*, or decree (*zabīr* in Arabic), an act perceived by many as an attempt to undermine the legal power of sharīʿa.¹⁷ France's control over the status and power of religion across its empire, particularly through "the simultaneous isomorphism of race and religion in the figure of the Muslim," sheds light on the divisive question of *laïcité*, or French secularity, in metropole France (Fernando 18).¹⁸ The unholy marriage of "racialization and secularization" in the figure of the unassimilable Muslim exposes *laïcité* as a political project that expands upon and extends colonial policies and practices (ibid.). It subsequently lays bare the entanglement of religion, culture, and politics within French (post)colonial ideology, which sought to "to secularize Islam by turning it into religion, distinct from culture and politics" (ibid. 22).

In addition to contextualizing some of the complexities of Maghrebi cultural practices, these histories inform the academic inclinations that have shaped Maghrebi studies. The Maghreb does not sit comfortably within the organizational logics that govern scholarship on Arab, African, and Muslim populations. Critical studies on the Maghreb rose to prominence in the US academy during the mid-1990s to early 2000s, facilitated in large part by the flourishing of Francophone studies and its associated academic press imprints, alongside the increased translation and publication of Francophone fiction into English.¹⁹ Maghrebi studies has largely remained under the disciplinary auspices of French and Francophone studies departments, with limited attention devoted to the region's Arabophone traditions. By virtue of its disciplinary conscription within Francophone studies, Maghrebi literature has historically been examined through a postcolonial framework. It is more likely to be geopolitically linked to sub-Saharan Africa rather than the Middle East and North Africa—exposing the privileging of the French language and culture as a metric of cultural modernity. This further divorces Maghrebi literature from the heterogeneity of Arab/ic and Muslim cultural histories and narrative practices.

On the other hand, canonical narratives of Arab/ic cultural production either document the unidirectional flow of cultural capital from colonial metropolises, or they privilege the countries of the Mashriq—as in the adage "Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads." The omission of the Maghreb speaks to the canonization of literary practices and reading publics along normative ethnonational and linguistic demarcations. These biases replicate broader problematics within Arab/ic literary studies in the United States and Europe. The dominant periodization of Arabic literature traces a

Eurocentric developmental arc that begins with the pre- and early-Islamic periods, followed by the four-century-long Golden Age (al-‘aṣr al-dhahabī), the Age of Decline/Decadence (‘aṣr al-inḥiṭāt)—which coincides with the “Arab Middle Ages” and encompasses the fall of the Abbasid dynasty, the Mongol invasion, the Crusades, the rise of the Mamluk dynasty, and much of the Ottoman Empire—concluding with the *nabḍa*, or “Arab renaissance,” which is itself bookended by Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the close of World War I. This epochal timeline clearly credits European (colonial) modernity with the resuscitation of Arab literary, cultural, and scientific production. Heralded as the peak of Arab cultural modernity, accounts of the *nabḍa* are frequently inflected by orientalist and colonial rhetoric that rely upon dichotomies of the religious/secular and traditional/modern.²⁰ It is no coincidence that this period also corresponds with the flourishing of the Arabic novel—read, on the one hand, as a European (colonial) cultural import, and on the other, as the exemplar modern secular genre.

My focus on the Qur’an confronts the secularizing and Eurocentric tendencies of Maghrebi studies. The field’s simultaneous delimitation along linguistic and regional lines has resulted in the hypertrophy of Francophone criticism on the one hand, and the atrophy of Arabophone criticism on the other. The relative paucity of scholarship on indigenous Berberophone cultural production further underscores the divisiveness of French colonial policies, as well as their indelible imprint on subsequent academic practices and the canons they engender. It is striking how few studies of Maghrebi literature employ a comparative framework that seriously addresses both Arabophone and Francophone texts. Rather than trying to fill an empirical lacuna, this book troubles authoritative narratives about the meetings between East and West, and Islam and post-Enlightenment secular Europe that underpin the study of Maghrebi cultural production.

Desecularizing Critique

Literary scholars, philosophers, anthropologists, and political theorists have long grappled with the association of critique with secularism, tracing intellectual genealogies through Diderot, Kant, Hume, Hegel, Mill, Marx, and Foucault.²¹ Many attribute secularism’s conflation with antireligious thought to Enlightenment rhetoric that privileged reason, rational knowledge, and scientific truth as the torchbearers of modernity. This logic pits the secular real against specious religious opinion, faith, or belief in the divine (read: unreal). If the secular is fundamentally skeptical, religion, or so the argument goes, is inherently speculative.

In the context of literary studies, much of the debate surrounding these questions has centered on Edward Said's notoriously slippery concept of secular criticism in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*.²² Without explicitly defining the terms "secular" and "criticism," he theorizes a practice of literary criticism at once distant and situated, whose "political, moral, and social judgements" expose the chasm between "culture and system" (26). Describing criticism as profoundly *oppositional*, Said writes that it is

reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or of method. In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself, and if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma. . . . [C]riticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are non-coercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom. (29)

While the word "religion" is largely absent from much of the essay on secular criticism, the use of the charged terms "orthodox" and "dogma" imply a fraught relationship between secularism and religion.²³

In "Religious Criticism," the brief concluding essay to the volume, Said notes that religious discourse "serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly" (290). Religion, Said avers, "furnishes us with systems of authority and with canons of order whose regular effect is either to compel subservience or to gain adherents" (*ibid.*).²⁴ Read with the essay on secular criticism, the conclusion appears to inflect secularism with an antireligious tone. However, Said maintains a semantic and conceptual ambiguity, insofar as he tells us *what religion does* rather than *what religion is*. In this sense, the diverse critical readings of Saidian secular criticism are particularly informative.²⁵

Bruce Robbins argues that "perhaps the most crucial meaning of *secular*, in his usage, is as an opposing term not to religion but to nationalism" (26). Wendy Brown similarly operates from the starting point of "secularism as an instrument of empire" (n.p). Aamir Mufti, on the other hand, highlights the centrality of "minority culture and existence" to the Saidian concept (96). Meanwhile, Stathis Gourgouris notes, "Its most important dimension is not battling religion per se but disman-

ting theological politics of sovereignty in favor of radical conditions for social autonomy” (*Lessons in Secular Criticism*, jacket). He calls for “de-transcendentalizing the secular,” suggesting that the true labor of secular criticism is the dialectical critique of both secularism and antiseccularism (“Detranscendentalizing” 439). If, as these scholars propose, secular criticism opposes nationalism, imperialism, hegemony, and sovereignty, then its theological accenting suggests a very different understanding of religion—and specifically its ideological or political instrumentalization—from this book’s reading of Islam.

Theorizing the Qur’an as a literary intertext, I argue that it functions as an ethical mode/l of knowledge production that fosters critical reading practices. By not treating belief and critique as mutually exclusive practices, I avoid the binary logics that oppose freedom and coercion, or heterodoxy and orthodoxy. Such dualities run the risk of modeling agentival activity along a progressive political formulation in which “the normative political subject . . . remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion” (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 14). Returning to Said’s definition of criticism as “noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom,” this study’s formulation of Islam shifts emphasis to the critical pursuit of (spiritual) knowledge as an ethical praxis.

My use of ethics is informed by studies on the anthropology of Islam that argue against the distinction between ethics and morality as reflecting private and public modes of conduct respectively. This model, based in Aristotelian ethics and reiterated across Foucault’s oeuvre, suggests that ethics operates outside of the realm of social or political agency. As Talal Asad aptly observes, the relegation of religion to the private sphere is a fairly modern phenomenon that is largely rooted in the Protestant tradition. He reads the universalization and privatization of a series of beliefs, practices, and discourses under the transcendental category of “religion” as a by-product of the modern formulation of secular power.²⁶ Religion as such is “conceptually and practically tied to the emergence of ‘the secular’ as a domain from which it is supposed to be normatively independent but to which it is indelibly linked” (Mahmood, “Ethics and Piety” 225). In other words, religion is defined and delimited by the secular state apparatus and not the other way around. Hussein Agrama describes this as the *active principle of secularism*, whereby the state is “promoting an abstract notion of ‘religion,’ defining the spaces it should inhabit, authorizing the sensibilities proper to it, and then working to discipline actual religious traditions so as to conform to this abstract notion, to fit into those spaces, and to express those sensibilities” (503).

Expanding upon Asad's delinking of religion from the framework of belief in an a priori theological ontology, Mahmood theorizes the ethical dimensions of spiritual praxis as a series of embodied acts. More than a phenomenology of religion, Asad and Mahmood break from the bifurcation of mind and body within theorizations of piety, in order to consider their coconstitutive dynamic. Mahmood frames agency as an *ethical formation* in which ethics is intrinsic to the constitution of the self. It is "a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which [these subjects...] are located," but not categorically delimited by these conditions (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 32). She thus uncouples "the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics" in favor of a model in which "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (14–15).

Within the context of Muslim subjectivity, Mahmood's reading of agency beyond the binaries of suppression and subversion, or reiteration and resignification, calls attention to the ethical potentiality of iterative acts. Mayanthi Fernando similarly argues that the "framework of religion as culture cannot conceptualize Islam as an authoritative system of norms that engenders deep ethical and moral commitments on the part of the practitioner" (16). In this study, 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/1 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. Bearing in mind the Maghreb's fraught relationship to Islamicization, Qur'anic intertextuality illustrates the ways in which agency as an ethical formation entails the simultaneous inhabiting of and resistance to norms.

Mahmood's and Asad's critical interventions provide a valuable corrective to the influence of the secularization narrative on contemporary literary criticism. The privileging of secularism as the engine of cultural modernity is deeply embedded within taxonomies of narrative practices and forms, particularly the novel. Susanna Lee's study on narrative and secularism defines secularism as "a narrative structure, even a narrative strategy" reliant upon "the idea of the absence of a supreme structuring power" (13, 12). This relationship, she posits, is intrinsic to the epistemic construction of modernity and the power relations that reside therein. The coconstitutional reading of modernity and secularism challenges "The notion of a God who controls the entire world, who inscribes all people and all moments in a narrative of divine providence or of divine punishment and reward" (12). In this formulation, religion functions as a narrative on-

tology that structures human existence while simultaneously foreclosing critical forms of agency. It is worth noting that there is an ironic structural symmetry in the displacement of theological logocentrism in the name of a monolithic conception of modernity. By problematizing the relationship between secularism and critique, the framework of narrative ethics extricates literary forms and practices from a liberatory model of secular modernity.

A World Abandoned by God

The secularization of literature, and of the novel in particular, is predicated on a teleological understanding of cultural modernity that marries linear historical progress with the evolution of literary forms. Problematizing the novel as the penultimate genre of literary modernity, however, serves another crucial function. It calls attention to the fraught relationship between modernity, orientalism, and capitalist imperialism—or what Arjun Appadurai dubs the “hegemony of Euro-chronology” (3).²⁷ It is no coincidence that a generation of social and cultural theorists, including many from the Frankfurt school, were heavily influenced by the classical Weberian modernization thesis. Weber’s sociology of religion posits that modern capitalist society emerged from a disenchantment with religious discourse and institutions. On the one hand, proponents of the thesis fail to account for “the concrete ways in which European and American forms of secularity are indigenized in particular times and places around the globe, as well as to the ways ‘Western’ secularity was shaped by Latin Christendom’s colonial and postcolonial encounters with religious difference” (Neuman 16). On the other hand, postcolonial criticism has often overcorrected in its undervaluation of critical practices that take seriously questions of religion and piety.

Imagining cultural practices beyond a singular emancipatory political project brings to the fore a host of critical modes, ethical imperatives, and subjectivities easily obscured by postcolonial studies approaches. As Timothy Mitchell reminds us: “Modernity, like capitalism, is defined by its claim to universality, to a uniqueness, unity, and universality that represent the end (in every sense) of history. Yet this always remains an impossible unity, an incomplete universal” (24). This is precisely why the language of alternative modernities only serves “to revise the narrative of the West and to provide an alternative history of origins and influences” that remains predicated on the spatial logic of center and periphery (ibid.). Mitchell’s framing of modernity as a historiographic and discursive *staging* rather than a

stage is helpful for thinking through the developmentalist periodization of literary forms. Frequently read through the lens of belated modernity, the Arab/ic novel is often treated as an adaptation of the European genre—whereby a “universal” literary form is imbued with “local” content.

Theorizations of the novel across Euro-American literary criticism and continental philosophy largely conceive of it as a modern and inherently secular genre. In the oft-cited words of the Marxist literary critic Georg (György) Lukács, “The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). On the one hand, this formulation speaks to a post-Enlightenment moment in which religious ideology had waned within social, cultural, and political spheres of life. On the other, the novel, for Lukács, embodies an antitheological ontology. It seeks to answer the existential concerns of its age, namely a loss of faith in ideological totalities—religious or otherwise. And yet, the novel itself is an attempt at narrative totality, albeit an inherently heteroglossic and polyphonic one, as Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us. These centripetal and centrifugal forces create a productive tension in which totality is at once harnessed and unsettled.

Within canonical periodizations of the genre, the postmodern novel builds upon its modernist predecessor’s debunking of universalist truth. By collapsing master narratives, these works are said to resist the totalizing aspects of narrative world-building afforded by the genre. These antifoundationalist tendencies fuel the conflation of the novel with a distinctly secular project. Describing the secular nature of the postmodernist novel, Roland Barthes writes: “In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed . . . but there is nothing beneath. . . . [B]y refusing to assign a ‘secret,’ an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), [literature] liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law” (147). Barthes, alongside a number of poststructuralists and deconstructionists, views the codification of the word of God as antithetical to radical critical thought. As with Lukács, the novel here is metonymic of a world/ly cosmology in which meaning is unstable, rhizomatic, and polyphonic. Barthes’s Nietzschean treatise on the death of the “Author-God” posits that the author/god denotes foreclosure and the imposition of “a final signified” (ibid.). To kill the author is therefore to unshackle the signifiatory potential of a text. This liberatory rhetoric presupposes a model of reading in which the presence of an author-figure (secular or divine) restricts the interpretive possibilities of a text.

According to many Qurʾanic scholars and Islamic philosophers, Islam invites nonheteronomous modes of critically reading scripture. The concept of *ijtihād* references individual reasoning independent of precedent; it is contrasted with *taqlīd*, or imitative reliance on legal precedent. Within Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, *ijtihād* is generally applied to a jurist’s ability to deduce religious truths by employing their own intellect and training in *fiqh* (jurisprudence), scripture, as well as the Arabic language—rendering them a *mujtahid*. Islamic reformers, such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838–1897), mobilized the concept to account for the critical faculties of individual spiritual praxis, as well as to keep apace with social changes.

The authors featured in this book, alongside their interlocutors across Islamic thought, invoke the concept of *ijtihād* in their critical engagements with the Qurʾan. Their literary works, as well as my own close readings, resist the enshrinement of narrative texts within revelatory hermeneutical frameworks. Rather, writing and reading function as meditative, reflective, and embodied acts. This model of narrative ethics frames literary and scriptural texts as formally multivocal and hermeneutically open. These imbricated registers invite reading practices that rely upon phenomenological experience, contextualization, close reading, and the critical faculties of the individual. This renders legible a complex nexus of moral, spiritual, and intellectual concerns at the heart of my reading of Islam—namely, as an intrinsically critical practice that cultivates ethical modes of subjectivity in the pursuit of knowledge.

Undisciplining Literature

One of the major figures signaling the intersection of the Qurʾan and literature is the theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), who is referenced across the literary works in this book. His interdisciplinary approach to Islamic philosophy and Qurʾanic exegesis, coupled with his poetic narrative style, inspired theologians and literary scholars alike. Framing his poetics through the Aristotelian concept of poesis (*shāʿiriyya*), Islamic scholar Ebrahim Moosa writes that he “employed the very materials used by his predecessors, such as verses of the Qurʾān; prophetic report (*aḥādīth*); philosophical, legal, and theological discourses; and the narratives of mystics . . . so that they constituted an organic unity. Not only was the whole of the . . . new narrative very different from the sum of its parts, but the narrative also transformed the whole” (38). Like the authors in this study, al-Ghazālī paid homage to the Arab-Islamic heritage, or *turāth*, while simultaneously transforming it through its very recontextualization.

Transcending the rehashed debates surrounding *aṣāla* (cultural authenticity) and *taqlīd* (imitation), these writers reorient the very temporality of cultural innovation. This antiteleological understanding of historical time, what Moosa refers to as “heterotemporality,” undergirds not only the work of al-Ghazālī but many other Muslim thinkers cited in these novels—such as Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), and Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (858–922) (39). This temporal manipulation is further reflected in the formal construction of all six novels, in which the narratives are extratemporal (al-Maṣ‘adī), eschatological (Meddeb, Waṭṭār), palimpsestic (Djebar), proleptic (Chraïbi), or asynchronous (Barrāda).

Syrian poet and critic Adonis (b. Ali Ahmad Said Esber) addresses these concerns in his Janus-faced theory of modernity, which he argues exists recursively “both of time and outside of time” (*An Introduction to Arab Poetics* 99). Troubling progressivist notions of linear historical time, he reimagines the very chronotopic nature of aesthetic representation:²⁸

Modernity . . . [is] of time because it is rooted in the movement of history, in the creativity of humanity, coexisting with man’s striving to go beyond the limitations which surround him; and outside time because it is a vision which includes in it all times and cannot only be recorded as a chronological event: it cuts vertically through time and its horizontal progress is no more than the surface representations of a deep internal movement. In other words, modernity is not only a process that affects language; it is synonymous with its very existence. (99–100)

Poiesis, in this context, entails the process of narrative creation rather than the body of work it engenders. Twentieth-century Maghrebi intellectuals generally framed their literary projects through the lenses of *ibdā‘* (creation), *tajrīb* (experimentation), *tajdīd* (renewal), or *taṭawwūr* (development/evolution)—terms themselves originating in Qur’anic exegesis.²⁹ While these concepts address literary innovation, they do so within a notably different register than the categories of the avant-garde or postmodern. The future temporality of the avant-garde and postmodern suggests a disavowal of historical precedent that emerges from their mutual reliance upon periodization and generic taxonomies. With the concepts of *ibdā‘*, *tajrīb*, *tajdīd*, and *taṭawwūr*, however, the artistic process entails simultaneous creation and re-creation: reimaginings of the Arab-Islamic heritage work dialogically with cultural innovation. This productive tension derives from the unique ways in which literature and literariness have been conceived at once diachronically and synchronically through the concept of *adab*.

While the term *adab* first appeared in Arabic print around the eighth century, it did not become a subject of orientalist fascination until the 1940s, when the Italian scholar Carlo-Alfonso Nallino gave a lecture on the subject at Cairo University. Before *adab* was codified as the literary genre of belles lettres, it encompassed a broad range of genres and textual practices, in addition to carrying the valence of moral and intellectual refinement. Distinct from other fields within Arab and Islamic thought—such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *ʿilm* (knowledge; science), *tārīkh* (history), *falsafa* (philosophy), *manṭiq* (logic), *naqd* (criticism), *balāgha* (rhetoric), *ʿilm al-lughā* (lexicography; linguistics; philology), *ʿarūd* (prosody), and *al-bayān* (eloquence)—*adab* nonetheless overlaps with many of the methodologies from these disciplines.³⁰ It also includes poetry and prose, works about *adab*, historiography and geography, as well as some encyclopedias and biographies. Derivative fields include the formalist precursor *ʿilm al-adab* (the science of *adab*), often attributed to the fourteenth-century polymath Ibn Khaldūn, and *tārīkh al-adab* (the history of *adab*).

Due to its ideational ambiguity, *adab* resists conceptual or semantic codification. This polysemy is foundational to its history and application across Arab/īc and Muslim intellectual traditions. The etymology of the term is itself disputed; some philologists and historians argue that *adab* derives from the plural *ādāb*, which comes from *daʿb*, meaning “custom” or “habit.” Others still posit that *adab* comes directly from *ʿadb*, meaning “marvelous thing” or “invitation” (generally to a meal). According to *Al-mawrid*, the term signifies (1) hospitality, entertainment, hosting, or giving a banquet; (2) manners, etiquette, breeding, civility, decorum, or propriety; (3) culture or cultural refinement; (4) to educate, to cultivate, or to culture; (5) literature, letters, or belles lettres; and (6) ethics, morals, decency, or standards of behavior (64). *Hans Wehr* similarly defines an *adīb* as “cultured, refined, educated; well-bred, well-mannered, civil, urbane; a man of cultured and refined tastes; man of letters, writer, author” (9–10). Across these various definitions, the concepts of ethics and aesthetics are often in dialectical relationship with one another.

Adab carries a valence of both interdisciplinarity and intersubjectivity: it covers the moral and intellectual qualities of the *adīb*, the corpus of and about *adab*, in addition to the readers’ engagements with this body of work and its community of producers as well as fellow readers. As a pedagogical tradition, *adab* frames cultural creation and education as a collective process that moves across mediums, individuals, and historical times. Islamic intellectual historian Nadia al-Baghdadi notes the multiple possible translations of the term: “It is rendered most closely as ‘educational literature,’

‘etiquette,’ ‘*Bildung*,’ or ‘*paideia*’; others would go for ‘*humanitas*’” (439). While they cannot fully capture *adab*’s polysemy, *Bildung*, *paideia*, and *humanitas* do account for its interwoven pedagogical and moral dimensions—particularly as a practice directed at the cultural edification of a community around shared values.

Ira Lapidus argues that *adab* is a pivotal concept in Islam for articulating “the relationship between knowledge and action—to the inward flux of intellect, judgement, and emotion in relation to outward expression in speech, gesture, ritual, and action—as the key to the very nature of man’s being and his relationship to God” (40).³¹ Bridging inward comportment with outward behavior, *adab* stretches across aesthetic, spiritual, and existential registers: “Implicit in the study of *adab* are not only issues about literature and the role of literature in moral, religious, and social life, but also fundamental Muslim ideas about how life is to be lived to fulfill the religious goals of human existence” (ibid.).

Covering a broad range of disciplines and fields, *udabā’* (plural for *adīb*) were held to high aesthetic and ethical standards. *Adab* reflected both the intellectual labor of the *adīb*, as well as their erudition and moral standing. It further echoed the social and intellectual community surrounding the production of works of and about *adab*. Put otherwise, “*Adab* and the role of *adīb* came to represent both process and product: the process of contributing to the corpus of materials that would maintain and enhance the status of *adab* and the aesthetic norms of its practitioner, and the products of the education, diversion, and somewhat precious self-fulfillment that the corpus provided” (Allen 238). Across much of its history, *adab* entailed literary emulation of the elevated register of Qur’anic Arabic and was linked to a literate elite. As access to education and literature gradually extended beyond the royal court and religious intelligentsia, works of *adab* began to serve a broader reading public.

The distinction between form and content was a literary heuristic many orientalist scholars imposed onto *adab*. While some, such as Gustave E. von Grunebaum, “stressed that *adab* was a principle of form and not an ‘array of materials,’” others argued for the importance of content, alongside such concerns as style, tone, and intention (Malti-Douglas 10). Ilse Lichtenstädter, for example, claimed that despite its formal and thematic diversity, *adab* was united by the common purpose “of bringing knowledge to the people in an entertaining fashion” (Lichtenstädter qtd. ibid. 9–10). Attempts to disentangle form, content, style, and authorial intent suggest a fundamental misreading of *adab* within orientalist scholarship.

In a frequently cited entry in the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, S. A. Bonebakker offers a reading of the early usage of *adab* that addresses some of these tensions. He writes that it “may refer either to literary creativity, or else to literature as an object of philological study or to knowledge of literature as a mark of erudition. However, these two senses, with their respectively active and passive connotations, are not always clearly distinguished” (Bonebakker 19–20). *Adab* challenges hierarchies of objects, subjects, and acts within literary epistemologies, long before the critical interventions of formalism, structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction. It enriches the concept of narrative ethics precisely because of this ambiguity between creative acts, agents, and works. *Adab* thus opens the door to interdisciplinary and comparative modes of analysis for the study of cultural materials that cut across literary and theological discourses.

The concept of *adab* offers an alternative genealogy for understanding literary practices, tastes, and forms. In so doing, it troubles the seeming universality, across both historical time and geography, of the category of “literature.” Historicizing *adab*’s conscription within literary rather than religious institutions of higher learning in fin-de-siècle Egypt, Michael Allan exposes the institutional forces—from universities to printing presses—behind its generic transformation.³² The dismissal of *adab*’s ethical and embodied dimensions disavows other modes of literacy, reading practices, or textual forms. As Allan demonstrates, contemporary discourses of world and comparative literature can similarly codify ways of reading tied to the universalization of secular modes of knowledge production and subject formation. Reframing literary reading as a nexus of embodied practices, habits, and sensibilities directs us away from generic understandings of literature as a mere taxonomy of texts. This allows us “to consider how secular criticism defines religion as seemingly inimical to critical analysis” and to “begin to ask how secularism frames investments in particular definitions of what constitutes literary reading and sanctions ignorance about modes of textuality, dissent, and discussion within traditions deemed religious” (Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature* 137). As a literary (ur)text, the Qur’an introduces a unique set of formal and aesthetics concerns, not to mention directives on how to read. In the sections that follow, I examine these in order to consider how the Qur’an can be mobilized in literary analysis.

Qur'anic Aesthetics

Due to the overlapping qualities of knowledge production, cultural edification, and ethics, *adab* shares a complicated relationship with the broader Islamic sciences. The Qur'an's introduction in the seventh century challenged the then-reigning dominance of poetry as the literary form par excellence.³³ The theological doctrine of *ijāz al-Qur'ān*, or the inimitability of the Qur'an as a uniquely divine act of aesthetic expression, impacted the aesthetic standards of the pre-Islamic period while prompting some Muslims to look upon poetry with moral suspicion. Islam also introduced a number of fields related to the hermeneutical study of the Qur'an and hadith that both developed upon, and contributed to, existing literary methodologies. This dialogic relationship between Islamic intellectual traditions and literary practices was largely overwritten by European orientalist scholarship, which sought to secularize the concept of *adab* by noting its clear distinction from the Islamic sciences. Similarly, *adab* became conflated with secular humanism, or was divested of its holistic origins, in order to be partitioned into “moral, social, and intellectual” domains (Malti-Douglas 9).

Adab is by nature highly referential and often entails multivocality, as well as the weaving together of various narrative styles, voices, and sources—not unlike the Qur'an, hadith, and their surrounding scholarship. Similarly, integrating the Qur'an into works of *adab* through allusions, quotations, and veiled references can be traced to embodied spiritual practices such as rote recitation, memorization, and citation. Even the Qur'an's inimitability was integrated into existing theories of literary criticism, insofar as Muslims consider the holy text to be the highest form of literary eloquence. The Qur'an's literariness is said to be the impetus behind a renewed interest in literary arts, driving the documentation and collection of pre-Islamic poetry.³⁴ Crucially, the critical analysis of poetic form and language helped Qur'anic scholars “interpret opaque words and phrases in the revelation” (Holmberg 195).³⁵ Introducing novel “moral and metaphysical concepts,” the Qur'an expanded existing aesthetic standards, formal categories, and cultural modes of expression (bin Tyeer 3). The text's generic ambiguity elevated existing poetic modes of expression within a format that exceeded the parameters of prose. Its structural complexity, linguistic artistry, and profound interdisciplinarity, in turn, generated “a new type of reader, a new critic, and a new taste” (5). Poetic discourse and literary analysis thus functioned in concert with the development of Qur'anic hermeneutics.

The Qur'an's narrative style is distinct from that of the Bible or Torah: "As opposed to divinely-inspired compositions, translations, and redactions," it represents God's direct speech through the Prophet, hence its intimate bond with the Arabic language (El-Desouky, "Between Hermeneutic Provenance and Textuality" 12). It has been described as "the most meta-textual, most self-referential holy text known in the history of world religions. There is no other holy text which would refer so often to its own textual nature and reflect so constantly and pervasively its divine origins" (Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis* 2). The Qur'an is also notable for its nonlinear arrangement: the presentation of suras (chapters), in addition to the individual *āyas* (verses) therein, do not coincide with their historical chronology or the order in which they were revealed to the Prophet. Allegories, histories, edicts, prophecies, liturgies, and juridical proclamations are intermixed rather than formally, thematically, or chronologically grouped. The narrative logic of the Qur'an's final presentation is thus distinct from its existence as a sacred object of revelation.

The Qur'an's history is intimately tied to the existence and life span of the Prophet Muhammad; the dominant view being that verses were memorized and eventually written by scribes across the twenty-three-year period of prophetic revelations. The collation of the first written version of the Qur'an—a consonantal skeleton (*rasm*) absent of vowelings—is often dated to the era of the third caliph 'Uthmān (ruled 644–656) (Sinai 273). Guidelines for the final arrangement of the Qur'an are said to have been left by the Prophet after he received all of the revelations, in addition to being well-known to his companions (Von Denffer 23–28).³⁶ The codified version of the Qur'an, arranged roughly based on sura length from longest to shortest, has long been a subject of orientalist fascination. Early Qur'anic translators and scholars were frustrated by its "disjointed" organization, with some even describing it as incoherent or poorly written (Esack 64).³⁷ Many subsequently divide the Qur'an into the "Meccan" and "Medinan" periods, in reference to the Arabian cities across which the revelations were received. These categorizations map conceptual and ideological readings onto geohistorical periodization, such as the popular distinction between the philosophical or existentialist tone of the early Meccan suras and the more overtly political Medinan suras.³⁸

German orientalist scholar and translator Theodor Nöldeke's canonical revisionist chronology was published in *Geschichte des Qurāns* (History of the Qur'an) in 1860. Expanding upon the earlier Islamic tradition of grouping the Meccan and Medinan suras, he elaborated on the system by marking three chronological divisions within the Meccan period. This

trend began “to acquire a heuristic monopoly in Western research on the Qur’an. . . . The strong and undeniable sense of coherence and, particularly to Western eyes, reassuring linearity which it grants to the Muslim sacred text was greatly appreciated, while its historical and methodological assumptions were little, if at all, brought into question” (Stefanidis 1). The imposition of temporal linearity onto the Qur’an has been both a tool for its contextualization as well as an imposed hermeneutical strategy. It privileges the academic study of the text alongside literary criteria of narrative “legibility.” While Nöldeke’s revised model lost some traction in the mid-twentieth century, the division between the Meccan and Medinan revelations remains active within Euro-American Qur’anic studies.

The Qur’an’s largely length-based arrangement assists with the rote-recitation and memorization of the text, which is often performed in reverse order from shortest to longest. Recitability is central to the Qur’an as both divine logos and a textual object: in addition to the divine command to the Prophet Muhammad *iqra’*, the name Qur’an itself connotes reading/recitation. Appearing throughout the text, the word Qur’an is the *maṣḍar*, or verbal noun, of *qara’a* (قرأ): to declaim, to recite, to read, to study, to teach, to investigate, to examine, to explore, or to study thoroughly (*Hans Wehr* 753).³⁹ It blends questions of pedagogy with reading/reciting—not unlike *adab*’s valence of cultural edification. Alongside recitation, practices such as mimetic pedagogy, Qur’anic talismans, the physical ingestion of ink from Qur’anic memorization tablets, “service, personification and physical example” all highlight the centrality of “corporeal knowledge practices” to Muslim spiritual praxis (Ware 57). These embodied forms of knowledge are central to a theological ontology in which the Prophet Muhammad, to borrow historian Rudolph T. Ware’s metaphor, is the *walking Qur’an*, or a kind of Islamic urtext.⁴⁰ Ware’s argument echoes scholarship on the anthropology of Islam by Asad and Mahmood, in which Islam functions as both a “discursive tradition” and “a dense web of fully embodied encounters” (76).⁴¹

Within the Qur’an itself, there are frequent references to the importance of reading, recitation, and memorization to comprehending the text as a source of spiritual knowledge. One is “not simply learning something by rote, but rather interiorizing the inner rhythms, sound patterns, and textual dynamics—taking it to heart in the deepest manner” (Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an* 11). Michael Sells argues that recitation and memorization work hand in hand with the narrative complexity of the Qur’an: “The actual stories, which seem fragmented in a written version, are brought together in the mind of the hearer through repeated experiences

with the text” (12). In this sense, the sonic texture of the Qur’an—what Sells refers to as “sound-vision,” “lyrical meditation,” or “sound figures”—plays a significant role in spiritual praxis and Qur’anic hermeneutics (16, 19, 27). Moreover, it reveals the different registers on which the Qur’an’s narrativity operates: reading, copying, reciting, hearing, and memorizing the Qur’an each foster a unique experience of the text.

Returning to the Qur’an’s intense self-referentiality, the text frequently invokes its own symbolic narratology. The term *āya*, which is used to reference verses, also means sign, token, miracle, wonder, marvel, exemplar, utterance, or word (*Hans Webr* 36):

بَلْ هُوَ آيَاتٌ بَيِّنَاتٌ فِي صُدُورِ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ وَمَا يَجْحَدُ بِآيَاتِنَا إِلَّا الظَّالِمُونَ

Nay, but this [divine writ] consists of messages clear to the hearts of all who are gifted with [innate] knowledge—and none could knowingly reject Our messages unless it be such as would do wrong [to themselves]. (Qur’an 29:49 trans. Asad)⁴²

Moreover, the Qur’an refers to itself as *al-ḥadīth* (18:6), which, besides referencing the prophetic tradition, also means: speech, utterance, discourse, report, account, tale, or narrative (*Al-mawrid* 458).⁴³ Rhetorical concepts—largely derivatives of *m-th-l* (to resemble, imitate, compare, represent, or signify)—similarly appear across the Qur’an, highlighting the significance of its symbolic and allegorical devices (*Hans Webr* 891–92).

Theorizing the Qur’an’s distinct narrative techniques as *discontinuous nazm* (syntactic and textual arrangement), Ayman El-Desouky argues that its “unique styles of direct modes of address, sound and syntax, and temporal discontinuities” reflect “the form of its divine voice” while further signaling “a radical aesthetics of the untranslatable literary thrust of the Qur’an” (“Between Hermeneutic Provenance and Textuality” 29–30).⁴⁴ The Qur’an’s grammatical stylization, particularly the principle of *iltifāt*, is central to its untranslatability. *Iltifāt* references the frequent rhetorical and grammatical shifts in the Qur’an, which can include changes in the speaker, subject or addressee, verb tense, number (single, dual, plural), gender, case marker, personal pronouns, and even the use of nouns in place of pronouns.⁴⁵ Qur’anic code-switching can simultaneously be read across theological and literary registers, insofar as it precludes God’s anthropomorphization as “a reified deity” while reflecting the symbolic limitations of language: “In the Qur’an the divine voice is heard in a variety of manners through an extraordinary range of emotions and tones, but the form

or image of the speaker is never defined—a literary feature that mirrors the Qur’anic affirmation that the one God is beyond being fixed in any delimited form or image” (Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an* 20). Demonstrating the spiritual significance of Qur’anic narrative devices, *iltifāt* highlights how the Qur’an can serve as a model of ethical narratology in literary analysis.

Orientalist arguments on the supposed unintelligibility of the Qur’an need not venture beyond the text itself. The Qur’an affirms its theological and aesthetic inimitability in a number of suras: (12:2), (13:37), (16:103) (Esack 68). 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.

Hermeneutical Po/Ethics

Islamic scholars and exegetes have offered diverse points of entry into the analysis of the Qur’an that account for both its divine revelatory origins and its aesthetic beauty as a text. This dialectic between the sacred and the sublime, as well as revelation and hermeneutics, haunts the methodological concerns that frame Qur’anic studies. Qur’anic *tafsīr* (exegesis/hermeneutics) entails “the literary activity whose function is the elucidation of the clear and ambiguous aspects of the Scripture and its major principles” (Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis* ix). On the one hand, the Prophet Muhammad is often considered the first Qur’anic exegete, insofar as the Qur’an outlines his role in explicating the text to his followers. On the other hand, the Qur’an is said to self-elucidate, or to “have explained itself via intertextual reference within it (*al-qur’ānu yufassiru nafsahu*)” (xv).

Qur’anic scholars mobilize a variety of taxonomies, frequently dividing exegetical scholarship into formative and modern periods, as well as mainstream and nonmainstream schools of thought—each with their own branching subclassifications.⁴⁶ Hussein Abdul-Raof notes that “the mainstream school of exegesis . . . takes into account the exoteric (non-allegorical, literal) meaning of the Qur’ān,” while nonmainstream exegetes—which for him include Shi’a, Ismā’īlī, Ibādī, Mu’tazili, and Sufi approaches—“all resort to the esoteric (allegorical, underlying) meaning of the multi-faceted meanings of Qur’anic expressions” (Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis* xvi). These divisions are compounded by “whether an exegete advocates or rejects independent reasoning” or *ijtihād* (ibid.). Integrative approaches

to Qur'anic exegesis bring the Qur'an's literary and formal qualities into dialogue with its philosophical message; blending holistic methodologies with textual analysis, they combine surface, close, and distant reading.⁴⁷

Challenging textual or atomistic approaches, Amina Wadud's holistic Qur'anic hermeneutics reimagines traditional Qur'anic exegesis through the principle of *tawhīd*, which she defines as "the unicity of Allah, harmony in and unity of all creation under a single Creator" (xxvi).⁴⁸ Wadud's *hermeneutics of tawhīd* "emphasize[s] how the unity of the Qur'an permeates all its parts" through a holistic framework that balances the complex "dynamics between Qur'anic universals and particulars" (xii). Applying the foundational Islamic principle of *tawhīd* to the textual and conceptual analysis of the Qur'an serves a number of crucial functions. Primarily, it forges a relationship between the aesthetic qualities of the Qur'an and its ethical, spiritual, or philosophical dimensions.

This imbrication speaks to the practice of *ta'wīl*—an interpretive approach that scholars and practitioners distinguish from *tafsīr*—that is aimed at unearthing "the allegorical and esoteric significations" of the Qur'an (Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis* 102).⁴⁹ The term *ta'wīl* appears in the Qur'an (3:5–7) in reference to verses that are *muhkamātun* (clear or literal) versus those that are *mutashābihātun* (allegorical, figurative, or metaphorical).⁵⁰ Qur'anic translator Muhammad Asad writes that "since the Qur'an aims at conveying to us an ethical teaching based, precisely, on the concept of God's purposeful creativeness, the latter must be, as it were 'translated' into categories of thought accessible to man" (Qur'an trans. Asad 1132).⁵¹ Premised on the symbolic nature of the Qur'an, the concept of *ta'wīl* is simultaneously phenomenological and imaginative. In his study on Ibn 'Arabi, Henry Corbin defines *ta'wīl* "not [as] an allegorical exegesis but a transfiguration of the literal texts" that relies upon "the pre-eminence of the Active Imagination" (Corbin 88). This "symbolic exegesis" entails a kind of esoteric hermeneutics most profoundly articulated in Sufi philosophy (50). My own reading practices are informed by esoteric and Sufi hermeneutics, which rely upon a literary close-reading approach deeply invested in the symbolic. This aligns not only with the narrative strategies employed in the novels themselves but also with the intertextual figures and texts cited therein.

Sufism functions as one of the many modalities through which I read the expression of Islam as a polyvalent set of practices, beliefs, and doctrinal as well as hermeneutical approaches. In this sense, I push back against the Manichean rhetoric that bifurcates peaceful/heterodox Sufism from violent/orthodox Islam. While the entrenched distinction between "mod-

erate” and “extreme” Muslims has become a defining feature of contemporary public discourse on Islam, the romanticization of Sufism originates in orientalist colonial discourse. Islamic scholar Carl W. Ernst historicizes the term “Sufi-ism” in the late eighteenth century, writing that “British colonial officials . . . maintained a double attitude toward Sufism: its literary classics (part of the Persian curriculum required by the British East India Company until the 1830s) were admired, but its contemporary social manifestations were considered corrupt and degenerate in relation to what was perceived as orthodox Islam” (“Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism” 110). Their records, which informed much of the orientalist scholarship on Sufism in the nineteenth century, maintained “that Sufism had no intrinsic relation with the faith of Islam” (ibid.). Sufi literature was exoticized, while its practice was divested of social, political, or ethical value. The anticolonial resistance of various Maghrebi Sufi orders against French imperialism, for example, is often whitewashed in the fetishization of Sufism as an apolitical mystical practice.⁵²

My own usage of Sufism echoes Islamic scholar Sa‘diyya Shaikh’s thoughtful framing of the heterogeneous tradition:

Springing from the heart of Islam’s spiritual reservoir *Taṣawwuf*, or Sufism, can be described as the process by which a believer embraces the full spiritual consequences of God’s oneness (*tawḥīd*). The goal of the Sufi path is to enable a human being, through the cultivation of virtuous excellence (*iḥsān*), to commune directly and experientially with her Creator. In the historical development of Sufism, one encounters varied and increasingly sophisticated notions of the mystical path, or *ṭarīqa*. Such a path generally entails that the Sufi aspirant, under the guidance of a spiritual master, follows a practical method of purification and refinement of the self, undergoing many states (*aḥwāl*) and stages (*maqāmāt*) that lead to progressive unveilings of the divine reality (*ḥaqīqa*). (35)

Shaikh’s definition maintains Sufism’s internal heterogeneity as both a philosophy and an individual spiritual praxis. Her emphasis on the personal cultivation of virtue, often under the spiritual guidance of a more advanced practitioner, reiterates its simultaneous phenomenological and pedagogical orientations. Across the various theorizations of Sufism, there is a shared conceptualization of *taṣawwuf* as a path or process toward communion, and eventually unification, with God—a divine presence manifested in all of creation.⁵³ While the precise terminology and ordering of these steps varies according to individual Sufi orders, they generally encompass *shawq*

(yearning) or *ṭalab* (searching); *maʿrifa* (knowledge/gnosis); *ʿishq* (love/desire); *riḥāʾ* (contentment) or *istiḡhnāʾ* (detachment); *ittiḥād* (union); *ḥayra* (ecstatic wonderment) or *duwār* (vertigo); and conclude with *fanāʾ* (the annihilation or dissolution of the self)—often alongside *faqr* (material and existential impoverishment).

Sufi poetic discourse, or what I have elsewhere theorized as “Sufi po/ethics,” encompasses the aesthetic dimensions of *taṣawwuf*, in which spiritual experience is at once enacted and expressed through conceptual language and symbolization (H. El Shakry, “Abdelwahab Meddeb and the Po/Ethics of Sufism” 98). As a philosophical ethos premised upon the hidden, concealed, or transcendental nature of spiritual life, Sufism resonates with the representational qualities of literary expression. It mobilizes the dialectic within Qurʾanic exegesis between the *bāṭin*, or esoteric, and *ẓāhir*, or exoteric meaning of divine revelation. In Sufism, the *ẓāhir* references the external and material world manifested in the body, while the *bāṭin* is the realm of the soul and inner knowledge. The pairing appear across the Qurʾan, particularly in the sura “Al-ḥadīd” (“The Iron”), in which they reference two of God’s ninety-nine names/attributes (57:3), and the gate separating true believers from those of weak faith on the Day of Judgment (57:13).⁵⁴ The dialectical concepts of *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir* reveal the overlapping registers of Qurʾanic hermeneutics, divine providence, and phenomenological spiritual experience. Calling attention to the Qurʾan as both a revelatory and a literary object, they trace a formal and methodological relationship between aesthetic expression and divine truth.

Adonis argues that Sufi poetics have the potential to disrupt both epistemic structures and ontologies of being. His critical study *Al-ṣūfiyya wa-l-sūriyyaliyya (Sufism and Surrealism)* examines the uncanny intersections between Sufism and surrealism as philosophies rooted in the transcendental, the ineffable, the unknowable, dream-states, and the unconscious. They share, on the one hand, a mutual suspicion of dogmatic orthodoxy, and on the other, a defiance of “traditional aestheticism” (Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism* 16). Concerned with interrogating the nature of existence, both participate in symbolic orders unmediated by the binaries of spirit/matter, thought/action, or material/immateral. Their antipositivism foregrounds the relationship between aesthetic, phenomenological, and transcendental experiences. This pairing highlights Sufism’s aesthetic qualities while simultaneously unsettling the ways in which avant-garde movements such as surrealism are often tethered to secular epistemes.

The tension between representation and phenomenological experience is central to the aesthetic philosophy undergirding Sufism. Sufi literature explores “the limits of language and the sayable, that which can and that which cannot be said, written, spoken of, in relation to desire, belief and the sacred” (Elmarsafy, *Sufism in the Contemporary Arabic Novel* 8). Not relying upon a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified, Sufism offers a conceptual vocabulary for conveying sublime experience. In this dynamic “relationship between mysticism and apophysis,” symbolic excess works dialogically with representational absence (ibid.). The opacity and intense symbolization of Sufi poetic language enables spiritual knowledge, since Sufis “use art in their doctrines about God and existence and man: figurative language and style, symbolism, metaphor, imagery, rhythm, wordplay; the reader experiences the experience, and has a glimpse of their horizons through their art” (Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism* 18). This poetic language works through “allusion rather than explanation,” insofar as “everything in it is symbolic: everything in it is itself and something else” (ibid.). As Sufism relies upon figurative language and symbolism to express embodied spiritual experience, it has generated a rich repository of conceptual imagery that fosters very particular ways of reading.

As a hermeneutical practice, Sufism does not assume a direct equivalence between revelatory texts and their meanings. This echoes Adonis’s privileging of the process of textual production over the archive that it engenders. More than a corpus of “written dogma,” Sufi philosophical literature models a path of writing intimately connected to its “gnostic domain” (20)—hence the significant role that writing plays within many of the novels in this study. This highlights its methodological significance to both theological and literary practices: “the importance of the Sufi contribution lies in its re-reading of the religious texts and the attribution to them of other meanings and dimensions; this in turn permits a new reading of the literary, philosophical and political legacy, which has led to a fresh look at language, not only in the religious context but also as a tool of revelation and expression” (ibid.). Sufism’s hermeneutical privileging of the ineffable, unknowable, and unimaginable fosters an embodied and experiential semiotics for approaching narrative texts. It serves as a model for ethical modes of knowledge production that informs not only the fictional works in this book but also my own close-reading practices.

The Literary Qurʾan

Written between the 1940s and 1980s, the six novels in this study offer diverse points of entry for examining the relationship between the Qurʾan and Maghrebi literature. Each of the three sections pairs a canonical Francophone and lesser-known Arabophone novel from Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco respectively. More than simply shared national contexts, the pairings speak to overlapping thematic and formal topoi that emerge in and through these side-by-side readings. The book's narrative arc traces a trajectory from Tunisia through Algeria and Morocco, an organizational logic that deliberately moves from the least to the most commonly theorized cultural archives of the Maghreb. In many ways, Tunisia is considered the most "Arab" country of the Maghreb and is more commonly absorbed into Middle Eastern than Francophone or postcolonial studies scholarship. Morocco, on the other hand, is frequently interpellated as the most cosmopolitan (read: French) country of the Maghreb, while also occupying a privileged space within the American global imaginary.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, as the only settler colony and longest-occupied, Algeria simultaneously reads as the most colonial and anticolonial of the three.

Section I, "Poetics of Piety," explores Sufi poetics in Maḥmūd al-Masʿādī's *Mawlid al-nisyān* (The genesis of forgetfulness, 1945) and Abdelwahab Meddeb's *Talismano* (1979). Section II, "Ethics of Embodiment," theorizes Muslim ethics amid the fraught ethnolinguistic tensions of (post) colonial Algeria in al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār's *Al-zilzāl* (*The Earthquake*, 1974) and Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* (Love, fantasia, 1985; translated into English as *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*). Finally, Section III, "Genealogies of Transmission," uses Qurʾanic intertextuality and narratology to challenge periodizations of literary (post)modernity in Driss Chraïbi's *Le passé simple* (*The Simple Past*, 1954) and Muḥammad Barrāda's *Luʿbat al-nisyān* (*The Game of Forgetting*, 1987).

The study opens with two experimental novels from Tunisia, including the earliest work in this book: Maḥmūd al-Masʿādī's 1945 *Mawlid al-nisyān* (The genesis of forgetfulness). The highly philosophical work is the most conceptual of the six under examination. It offers a meditation on the phenomenological dimensions of Islamic praxis that is inflected by Sufism, existentialism, and humanism. The chapter frames these concerns within al-Masʿādī's broader philosophical writings on Islam and literature. The second chapter, on Abdelwahab Meddeb's experimental 1979 novel *Talismano*, moves into the more contemporary context of postindependence Tunisia. I examine Meddeb's polemical attack on Bourguiba-era Tunisia, in

which hegemonic power is simultaneously concentrated in state and religious institutions. The novel counteracts these forces in its rescripting of the Qur'an as well as its invocation of Sufi figures, texts, and rituals.

Al-Mas'adī and Meddeb shared similar pedagogical training, which is quite explicitly reflected in their philosophical orientations and literary preoccupations. Both studied at the elite al-Ṣādiqiyya, which was founded in 1875 by the reformer Khayr al-Dīn Pasha al-Tunisi—just five years before the official start of the Protectorate. The school diversified the educational offerings of Qur'anic madrasas and was eventually brought under the administrative auspices of the Protectorate, when it shifted from a reformist approach to Islamic studies toward a curriculum that better served French colonial interests (Perkins 69).⁵⁶ Al-Mas'adī and Meddeb both then studied at al-Zaytūna mosque and university, followed by the Sorbonne. Meddeb's grandfather, Shaykh Mukhtār Meddeb, was a Qur'anic scholar and teacher at al-Zaytūna; meanwhile, his father, Shaykh Muṣṭafā Meddeb, was a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence and a poet. Meddeb eventually settled in Paris, where he continued to write creative and critical works, predominantly on Islam, Sufism, and critical theory. Al-Mas'adī, on the other hand, returned to Tunisia, where he prolifically penned essays and serialized fiction in literary journals. His political involvement in the Neo-Dustūr party facilitated a series of prominent roles in the postindependence government: he was minister of cultural affairs (1973–1976), Speaker of Parliament (1981–1986), and the mastermind behind Tunisia's educational policy following independence (1958–1968).

Al-Mas'adī frequently stressed the immense influence of an Islamic education on his intellectual formation, noting that his experience was in fact indicative of many from his generation. He said that it was his early *mu'addib* (religious teacher) who taught him to memorize the Qur'an from approximately the ages of five to ten, during which time he was immersed “in the atmosphere of the book” (*fi jaww al-kitāb*) (al-Mas'adī, *Collected Works* 3:340). Of his experience at the “Franco-Arabe” school, al-Mas'adī explains:

That was an era in which I was influenced by the melodies and musicality of the Qur'an. I used to repeat and recite the parts I had learned in the manner of a chant [*tartīl*]. I memorized the Qur'an as it sounded to my ear—according to its rhythms, the rhythms of the Qur'an—and I realized then that it was not only words but also revelation. Later I began to be influenced by the Qur'an intellectually, although I knew there is nothing within it that invites rational or logical approaches.

Through this process the reader of the Qur'an arrives finally—if they ponder its meaning logically—at the horizons of free speculation that we call imagination, or everything arising from within the conscience of which *taqwā* [consciousness of God, or piety] is comprised. And that is the boundless realm that man finds within the scope of the Qur'an or in God's domain. (ibid.)⁵⁷

At al-Ṣādiqiyya, al-Mas'ādī cemented his “Muslimness and Arabness” (*aṣṣalamī fi Islāmiyyatī wa-'arūbatī*) (3:341). He continued studying the Qur'an while being introduced to a broader “world of Islamic thought” (*'ālam al-tafkīr al-Islāmī*) that included Islamic philosophy, *tafsīr* (exegesis), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence)—particularly jurisprudence related to “social life” (ibid.). Even when al-Mas'ādī moved to Paris to study at the Sorbonne, where he trained with a range of orientalist (Louis Massignon) and colonialist scholars (Georges Marçais), he continued his Islamic studies.

Despite their common intellectual influences and interlocutors, the divergences between al-Mas'ādī and Meddeb's professional paths are echoed in both their critical and literary writings. While Meddeb divested from the Tunisian cultural and political scene, he was active in the French intellectual world. This is reflected in the stylistics of his poetry chapbooks (1987–2001), the Paris-based literary journal *Dédale* that he edited until his passing, and even his monographs against political Islam that aligned with French political debates surrounding *laïcité*.⁵⁸ In his first novel, *Talismano*, the imprint of his studies at al-Ṣādiqiyya and al-Zaytūna are perhaps most pronounced.⁵⁹

Meddeb and al-Mas'ādī's fiction deftly incorporates the Qur'an, as well as Islamic philosophers such as Ibn 'Arabī, Rumī, Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, and Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī. Their works also critically engage the corpus of hadith, alongside questions of transmission, verification, and dissemination within Islam. More than simply influences, these texts and figures shape the very formal, grammatical, lexical, and stylistic construction of their respective works. *Mawlid al-nisyan* and *Talismano* echo broader philosophical concerns theorized in al-Mas'ādī and Meddeb's critical writings, particularly surrounding the relationship between artistic creation, ethics, and spiritual praxis. I read both novels as articulating and performing a model of literary writing that frames artistic creation as intrinsic to critical Muslim subjectivity. This endeavor is largely expressed through the conceptual language and poetics of Sufism.

Section II opens with a discussion of al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār's 1974 novel *Al-zilzāl* (*The Earthquake*). Born in eastern Algeria to an indigenous Amazigh

family, Waṭṭār attended an Islamic madrasa before he pursued Islamic jurisprudence at the Ben Bādīs Institute in Constantine. He eventually moved to Tunisia to study at al-Zaytūna, where both al-Mas‘adī and Meddeb trained. A politically active Marxist deeply invested in Algeria’s protracted war for independence (1954–1962), Waṭṭār eventually abandoned his studies at al-Zaytūna to join the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, or FLN) as a party controller in 1956. He remained with the FLN until his forced retirement in 1984 due to political divergences from the party. Waṭṭār’s leftist political leanings are reflected not only in his short stories, novels, and plays but also in his active role in print media across the 1960s and 1970s.

Waṭṭār is a somewhat controversial figure within the Algerian cultural scene, whose politics fused Marxist ideology with a nationalist ethos reliant upon Islam and the Arabic language as the torchbearers for Algerian national identity. My analysis tempers readings of Waṭṭār as a fervent Islamist and nationalist by examining his subtle engagement with various philosophical and ideological debates within Islam. Chapter 3 focuses in particular on *Al-zilzāl*’s creative rewriting of Qur’anic eschatology in its portrayal of the tortured temporality of postindependence Algeria. As with al-Mas‘adī and Meddeb, Waṭṭār’s novel mobilizes the Qur’an as a literary framing device and as a formal as well as thematic intertext. The work further draws upon the fourteenth-century polymath Ibn Khaldūn, in addition to major figures within the Islamic reformist movement also referenced in Meddeb’s and Djebar’s novels.

Al-zilzāl’s temporal contortions are echoed in Chapter 4, on Franco-phone Algerian novelist Assia Djebar’s 1985 *L’amour, la fantasia* (Love, fantasia; translated as *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*). The novel pendulates between the violent expansion of Islam into the Maghreb in the seventh century, the savage occupation of Algiers by French forces in 1830, and the eight-year war for independence between 1954 and 1962. The fourteenth-century North African historiographer and philosopher Ibn Khaldūn is a controversial figure in both Djebar’s and Waṭṭār’s novels. While *Al-zilzāl*’s misanthropic protagonist takes issue with Ibn Khaldūn’s glorification of an Arab culture that he believes to be in decline, *L’amour, la fantasia* recounts the polymath’s graphic chronicling of the forced assimilation of Algeria’s indigenous population alongside his identitarian affiliation with Arab rather than Amazigh origins. In addition to Djebar’s framing of the Arab-Islamic expansion into Algeria as a colonial project, she weaves Qur’anic references to revelation, recitation, and reading into her explicitly feminist historiography. Djebar is undoubtedly one of the most recognized and

theorized Algerian novelists of the twentieth century, even being inducted into the illustrious Académie française in 2005. The ease with which she circulates within a postcolonial Francophone cultural sphere signals the ways her work has been critically divested of Islamic (and to a lesser extent, indigenous) valences in order to make her legible as a secular feminist.

Djebar's palimpsestic novel mobilizes a variety of discursive traditions, including the Qur'an, that reflect the country's fraught colonial history. In the process, it uncouples Muslim ethics from the Arabic language as the privileged site for Qur'anic knowledge. Moreover, the novel's emphasis on orality and embodiment challenges colonial and national archives with its polyphonic hermeneutics. I read the work in dialogue with Djebar's broader literary and cinematic oeuvre, in which the concept of *ijtihad* is foundational to her revisionist feminist project. *L'amour, la fantasia* delves into Djebar's early studies at a madrasa before her privileged Francophone education: at a French colonial school where her father taught, and as the first Algerian woman to be admitted into the elite *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris.

Moroccan novelist Driss Chraïbi (1926–2007) similarly began his education in a Qur'anic madrasa at a young age, before attending an elite French school in Casablanca. He completed his studies in France, where he eventually published his first novel, *Le passé simple* (*The Simple Past*) in 1954. It was largely received as an autobiographical work attacking Islam and justifying French cultural imperialism.⁶⁰ Chapter 5 instead reads the novel as a complex engagement with the Qur'an that, like *Talismano*, traces the collusion of religious and state structures under the Protectorate. Manipulating the French language on a grammatical, lexical, and stylistic level, *Le passé simple* goes one step further than *Talismano* or *L'amour, la fantasia*. The novel employs the metaphor of the grammatical tense the *passé simple*, alongside Qur'anic intertextuality, to stage a double critique against colonial and nationalist teleologies. I read the novel's repeated image of the hallucinatory abstraction *la ligne mince* (the thin line) in relation to both Qur'anic symbolism and Sufi philosophy.

The closing chapter is on Moroccan novelist, journalist, translator, professor, and literary critic Muḥammad Barrāda (b. 1938). If Chraïbi signals the vanguard of decolonization, and *Le passé simple* as ushering in the modernist Francophone Moroccan novel, then Barrāda exemplifies the postcolonial intellectual, and for most literary critics, his 1987 novel *Lu'bat al-nisyān* (*The Game of Forgetting*) is the paradigmatic Arabic postmodernist novel. Chapter 6 reads Barrāda's literary project in dialogue with his prolific writings on literary criticism, and translations of such theorists as

Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes. It argues that *Lu'bat al-nisyān* champions polyphonic discourse across literary and theological spheres. This chapter most explicitly applies the Qur'an as a model for *formal* literary analysis.

Lu'bat al-nisyān is introduced by Barrāda not as a novel per se, but as “*naṣṣ riwā'i*,” or a “novelistic text.” Novelization is thus a narrative or discursive mode rather than a fixed generic category—a sentiment echoed across the theoretical writings of Barrāda and his cohort of experimental Moroccan novelists and theorists. The text oscillates between historical, narrative, and metanarrative time, as well as between diegetic and metatextual narrators. I read its authorial decentering and polyphonic narrative structure not as the collapsing of theological discourse as an inherently totalizing force but, rather, as its expansive opening. The chapter's framing of Qur'anic intertextuality and narratology as commensurable with literary postmodernity unsettles the enmeshment of literary genres within secular epistemes. It instead situates literary experimentation within a nexus of narrative and formal modes, as well as hermeneutical strategies, inflected by the Qur'an and tradition of hadith.

Maḥmūd al-Ma'sadī's *Mawlid al-nisyān*, Abdelwahab Meddeb's *Talismano*, al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār's *Al-zilzāl*, Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia*, Driss Chraïbi's *Le passé simple*, and Muḥammad Barrāda's *Lu'bat al-nisyān* problematize conventional generic taxonomies and their attendant historical timelines. Working within and against the grain of a variety of narrative traditions—at once scriptural and literary—they disrupt the ways in which literary modernity is interpellated through false binaries of private/public, ethical/political and sacred/secular. In so doing, they render legible modes of narrativity, embodiment, and reading often deemed epiphenomenal to literary analysis. Reading these novels paratactically with the Qur'an, *The Literary Qur'an* models new ways of engaging narrative ethics in literary studies.