

Novel Traces of the Qur'an?

HODA EL SHAKRY, *The Literary Qur'an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb* (New York: Fordham UP, 2020), pp. 235, paper, \$28.00.

Some say the Arab novel was born in 1913 with the publication of Egyptian Muhammad Husayn Haykal's *Zaynab*. But all firsts, of course, are contested. So others exhumed nineteenth-century exemplars, noting that their precursors are the tenth-century *maqamat* of Badi al-Zaman al-Hamadani thought to have influenced the emergence in the sixteenth century of the Spanish picaresque novel. Critics contemptuous of originary boasts declare the Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz to be the pioneer of the Arab novel when in the middle of the twentieth century he published a trilogy about pharaonic Egypt. Without entering into this dating game, we can safely say that whenever the Arab novel appeared, it was a predominantly secular genre even when it dealt with Muslim icons. The Qur'an revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century was a thing apart from all such prose narratives.

With her formal, interdisciplinary, historically situated, and comparative analysis of the centrality of the Qur'an's narrative ethics to the construction of six late colonial and post-independence Maghrebian novels, El Shakry makes a crucial intervention in the secularism debate. She compels a new way to read texts that do not explicitly engage with the Qur'an as either a literary or a revelatory object, yet are saturated with its ethics. In so doing, she blurs the line between religious and secular, writing, "In their intertextuality with the Qur'an and Islamic philosophy, the novels in this study disrupt the bifurcation of secular and religious discourses" (3). Deconstructing these Arabs' writing practices, she reveals formal engagements with the Qur'an, as a "literary intertext" (140), that may be visible to scholars only but are crucial for the ways in which they introduce "a unique set of formal and aesthetic concerns, not to mention directives on how to read" (19). Writing about al-Tahir Wattar's *The Earthquake*, El Shakry alerts readers to the way in which this Algerian novel "recalls the Qur'an's formal qualities of multivocality, nonlinearity, asynchronicity, and grammatical or rhetorical code-switching" (89). Muhammad Barada's *The Game of Forgetting* does something similar not only with the Qur'an but also with the other part of Islamic scripture, the Hadith literature. Hadith refers to the stories that the Prophet Muhammad's companions told of their witness to his words and actions that have been passed down through a reliable chain of authorities for almost a millennium and a half to determine precedent for law and ethics across time.

The introduction carefully defines key Arabic terms, including *adab* (literature from its earliest iterations as moral guide to its contemporary usage as fiction and poetry), *ijtihad* (individual interpretation of religious texts), and *ishq* (divine love as found in Sufi poetry). The book is divided into three parts according to the authors' nationalities—Tunisian, Algerian, and Moroccan. Each part contains one Arabophone and one Francophone novel. El Shakry features six novels by five men and one woman: Tunisians Mahmud al-Mas'adi and Abdelwahab Meddeb; Algerians Wattar and Assia Djebbar; and Moroccans Driss Chraïbi and Barada. El Shakry's theoretically informed and Sufi-inflected close reading of these

complex and often experimental novels proposes “ethical ways of approaching questions of writing, reading, and literary hermeneutics” (5).

El Shakry pairs these novels in such a way that they tell a sociopolitical story beyond the stated hermeneutical project. She claims that the Tunisian novels, al-Mas’adi’s mythical Arabophone *The Genesis of Forgetting* (1945) and Meddeb’s heterodox Francophone *Talismano* (1979)—which seems to foretell the 2010 revolution—perform “a model of literary writing that frames artistic creation as intrinsic to critical Muslim subjectivity” (31) that “draw[s] from Sufi aesthetics” (59). The Algerian novels, Wattar’s apocalyptic Arabophone *Earthquake* (1974) and Djebbar’s feminist Francophone *L’amour la fantasia* (1985), revolve around the national and cultural chaos that followed the expulsion of the French settlers in 1962. The Moroccan novels, Chraïbi’s iconoclastic Francophone *Le Passe Simple* (1954) and Barada’s decolonizing Arabophone *The Game of Forgetting* (1987), conduct what Moroccan philosopher Abdelkebir Khatibi called a double critique of the corrupt clerical establishment and the hypocritical Francophile capitalists.

These novels written in the languages of the colonized and the colonizer challenge, El Shakry asserts, the split between the authentic Arab self and the imposed French other that had dominated Maghrebian thinking. Djebbar’s Algerian French, like Meddeb’s and Chraïbi’s, is not the language of the master that must be rejected. Rather, Maghrebian French in the postindependence era is the language of resistance that the subaltern manipulates and weaponizes against colonialist historiography. This Maghrebian French, El Shakry writes, is haunted by “the specter of both Arabic and the Qur’an” (115). A vivid example comes from the pen of Djebbar, who called French her father tongue that she tried to make strange by infusing it with the fantasia of Arabic and Berber, her mother tongue. So elegant was the result, however, that far from alienating her French readers, her French-language novels, foremost among them *L’amour la fantasia*, earned her a coveted seat in the Academie Francaise in 2005. She was the first writer from the Maghreb to be so honored.

The Literary Qur’an is a book for scholars of contemporary Arab literature, especially the novel. It is not written for scholars of other literatures and certainly not for the general reader. Although El Shakry explains Arabo-Islamic terms, their recurrence throughout stops the nonspecialist as do the dense prose and jargon. Read, for example, this statement: “Djebbar’s uncoupling of Muslim ethics from the Arabic language as the privileged site for Qur’anic discourse suggests a polyphonic modality of critical Muslim subjectivity” (116). Recondite references to the classical tradition will be lost on many. Further, the cover art is off-putting in its violence even to the specialist. Why choose a fierce steel saw blade with a Qur’anic inscription to illustrate a book about the imbrication of the holy book with contemporary novels? This image suggests not harmony but rather destruction.

That said, this work will be of great interest and value to specialists who will agree with El Shakry’s conclusion: “Reading [these] novels through Qur’anic narratology and intertextuality unseats the dominant critical paradigms of anticolonial nationalism and literary commitment through which this body of literature is often mediated” (165).

* * *

MIRIAM COOKE is Braxton Craven Professor Emerita of Arab Cultures at Duke University. She has been a visiting professor in Tunisia, Romania, Indonesia, Qatar, and Istanbul. Her writings have focused on the intersection of gender and war in modern Arabic literature, Arab women writers' constructions of Islamic feminism, contemporary Syrian and Khaliji cultures, and global Muslim networks. In addition to coediting five volumes, she is the author of several monographs, the most recent of which is *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution* (2017), and a novel, *Hayati, My Life* (2000).