Postcolonial Fiction and Sacred Scripture: Rewriting the Divine? by Sura Qadiri (review)

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This is an important intervention into discussions of the relationship between literary discourses and sacred scripture. Focusing primarily on recent francophone North African novels, Sura Qadiri examines the positions that literary works take with respect to sacred texts, from latent and inadvertent engagements with the divine, to outright assertions of distinction, in which literary forms are construed as anti-doctrinal and subversive of religious orthodoxies. Through a series of careful readings, Qadiri argues that the distinction commonly made between literary and scriptural form in the context of Islam is misguided, and that fictional works exploring the intersection of sacred narrative and personal experience offer alternative models for thinking about the literary critique of political Islam. This broad treatment of texts and theories, Qadiri explains, is motivated by a growing understanding and promotion of the literary genre amongst some francophone writers from North Africa and the Middle East as a threat to established monotheistic discourse (p. 2). Such perspectives are exemplified by the works of writers such as Fethi Benslama which, as Qadiri maintains, reductively construe monotheistic (Islamic) discourse as dogmatic while promoting literature as an ‘inherently secular space’ (p. 6). The chapters of this book offer productive comparisons that bring together French theory and francophone literature, including works by Tahar Ben Jelloun, Amin
Maalouf, Assia Djebar, and Abdelwahab Meddeb. To cite two examples, Chapter 1 reads Meddeb’s novel Talismano through Jean-Luc Nancy’s reflection on his own heart transplant operation in L’Intrus. Through this comparison, Qadiri underscores how both texts trace the limits of writing to gesture at what is unrepresentable, figured as a space of excess and fragmentation, bearing traces of the divine. Subsequently, the discussion of Djebar’s La Disparition de la langue française, addressed alongside Georges Perec’s La Disparition, highlights how silences and gaps in narrative can challenge public discourses about piety. The most forceful arguments in the work emerge in the section offering readings of works by Benslama, Djebar, and Meddeb, where Qadiri analyses the different ways these authors take up the mukham (clear, fixed) and mutashabih (unclear, allegorical) discursive strands of the Quran to sustain pluralistic visions of Islam. In a context where Benslama and Meddeb’s critiques of Islam have attained notoriety, Qadiri convincingly argues that their works posit a notion of the literary as defined against a foundational narrative of Islam that overlooks the dialogism and open-endedness of Quranic narratives. In this analysis, Djebar’s novel Loin de Médine offers a counterpoint through both its nuanced treatment of the Islamic laws laid out in the ‘Madinan’ verses and its appeal for public discussion about orthodoxy. Qadiri’s book leaves the reader desirous of a more expansive discussion of the stakes of engaging with French theory by figures such as Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Marion, in a text primarily about Islamic scripture. A broader discussion of both ‘post-monotheism’ and the critique of modernity animating both the francophone authors and theorists discussed would have further enriched this excellent contribution to francophone cultural studies.

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This book offers a number of useful insights into Burundian history and its fictionalization. In his Preface, Marc Quaghebeur focuses on Juvenal Ngorwanubusa’s recurrent engagement with Burundian literature in French and Burundi as a fictional ‘object’. With regard to his corpus — which comprises short stories and novels published from 1947 to 2010, by Pierre Ryckmans, Gérard de Villiers, Paul Savatier, Nadine Nyangoma, Anna Geramys, Tobie Nathan, and Albert Russo — Ngorwanubusa contends that it belongs to ‘une littérature de type colonial’, only to add that whether it was written during or after colonization is irrelevant (p. 33). That colonial literature is not necessarily tied to a particular chronology is what constitutes the critical backbone of this study. Indeed, the author identifies in the different chapters recurring themes, tropes, and obsessions in these otherwise very diverse writers, and establishes a discursive continuum between their representations and those by nineteenth-century travel writers such as Richard Burton. Ngorwanubusa must be commended for his ability to trace in these narratives the demarcation lines between ‘histoire’ and ‘Histoire’ (p. 201). His analysis of the various crises that have characterized post-war Burundi — Prince Rwagasore’s assassination in 1961 but also ethnic massacres and pogroms in 1965, 1972, and 1993 — is very instructive and will help readers differentiate Burundi from Rwanda where the Hutu–Tutsi division has been driven by different factors. Understandably, this study focuses a great deal on the links between literature and violence, an area that has recently mobilized the attention of many Africanist scholars in France, Africa, and elsewhere. Apart from a perfunctory reference to Boubacar B. Diop, it is regrettable that the author does not take into account valuable perspectives developed, for instance, by African scholars such as Mahmood...