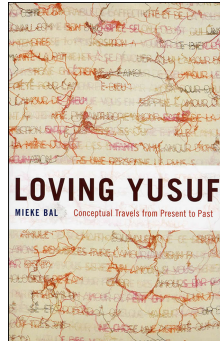


# ○ REVIEW OF MIEKE BAL, *LOVING YUSUF: CONCEPTUAL TRAVELS FROM PRESENT TO PAST. AFTERLIVES OF THE BIBLE*

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On page 25 of *Loving Yusuf* Mieke Bal writes, ‘What I like to think about the present essay is that it consists ... of fragments. Combining insights and associations borne by surprise with recollections borne by cultural memory, I collect fragments of different “versions” without pretending to make them cohere. I bring concepts from cultural analysis to bear on those fragments’. Not a bad summary of the way Mieke Bal works. Perhaps the best way to characterise her work is ‘fragmentary thought’. Read any collection of pages and you will find smatterings of feminism, semiotics, postcolonial theory, orientalism (its critique), psychoanalysis, history, intertextuality, deconstruction, cultural memory, fantasy, philosophy, personal responses and so on. Yet despite the eclectic feel of such reading, it avoids pure eclecticism through the underlying beat of her theory of narratology developed so many years ago.

*Loving Yusuf* plays off four texts against one another: the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in Genesis 19, the very different version of the story in Sura 12 of the Qur’an, another in Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers* and then an etching and two paintings by Rembrandt van Rijn, all of them called *Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife*. The book is motivated by the geopolitical situation – at least in some parts of the world – where Islam and Christianity have been appropriated as the ideologies of opposition and conflict. I write ‘some parts of the world’ since these oppositions are characteristic of the fortress mentalities of Western Europe and North America. Bal’s own politics are primarily feminist with a mildly leftist bent. And she professes no religious commitment while remaining thoroughly interested in the way religion is used. In a long discussion about these matters at an exhibition of her films (some are good, some not so much) in Fremantle in Western Australia, she expressed her dismay at the way religion is being used to foster all manner of intolerances, ruining the lives of ordinary people in the process.

Bal has written before on both the Hebrew Bible and Rembrandt, the latter interest arising from her search for a cover of one of the books from the 1980s on the Bible (*Femmes imaginaire*

from 1986). She does have a distinctive way of reading derived from narratology that always offers something new. What draws her interest in the four ‘texts’ discussed in this book is the fact that Mann obviously makes use of the Qur’an in his depiction of the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, when he makes use of the incident of the little knives. The story goes roughly as follows: Potiphar’s wife invites her women friends to a meal and asks Joseph to serve wine. After he has done so and mesmerised the women, they unknowingly cut themselves with exceedingly sharp and unseen blades. What is the function of this incident that does not appear in the Bible (sympathy, suffering and collectivity) and why does Mann use it? He must have consulted the Qur’an as he wrote his massive work, or rather collection of works on Joseph. And he did so during the rise of Nazi power in Germany, which for Bal is an exceedingly brave act.

The book is structured in terms of a series of themes: love, fantasy, ambiguity, signs (Qur’anic semiotics), truth, canon and fathers. These themes weave their way through the four versions of the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, although the connections are loose and not often clear. However, I actually found that the insights came from a few other ideas that emerged in the process, fragmentary insights that sparked off at odd moments: literalism, preposterous interpretation, and non-expert readings.

Inevitably, Bal must face the way texts such as the Bible and the Qur’an are used in both the local and the global, in everyday life and geopolitics. Her code for these matters is the opposition between fundamentalism and literalism. There is nothing much new in her definition of fundamentalism – rigidity, arbitrary fixation and law, which are locked into a confidence of having found the original formulation. But her claims for literalism are not quite what we would expect. What about literalism? Is not literalism the practice of Bible-brandishing Christians and Qur’an-brandishing Muslims? No, says Bal; it is respect for the textual artefact, no matter how much it may have changed over time. It is a deep sensitivity to the flexibility, suppleness and multiple versions of literature for which fixation is the ultimate travesty. Fundamentalism is a little like the stiff muscles and creaking bones of age compared to the supple, well-toned body of a youthful athlete.

So what does this literalism look like? One of its most intriguing elements is what Bal calls ‘preposterous’ readings. Initially she suggests that a preposterous reading ‘indicates a literal turning upside down of the order of time: pre- becomes post- and vice versa’ (p. 13). It really means much more than that. Through her constant use of the term, preposterousness signals an opening up of interpretation to all manner of channels closed to conventional modes of exegesis with their strict codes for historical sequence and patterns of ‘influence’. For example, it enables her to give names to the characters in the story. Joseph becomes Yusuf (not a great step there) and the unnamed woman becomes Mut, based on the thoroughly orientalist and Hollywood style of Mann’s name for her, Mut-em-enet. Through the book it becomes a personal name that draws Bal closer to this enigmatic literary figure. Now I can understand why such naming should be done, but I can’t help feeling that it is very Adamic: one names to possess, hold and order in relation to other names. And is it not significant that the woman is in fact nameless in the story apart from her relation to Potiphar and Joseph?

In the end, preposterous reading is another way of highlighting what should be called the necessary anachronism of any interpretation. I am deeply weary of the move made by some traditional biblical critics, who argue that some methods – usually historical or sociological ones – are true to the time in which the Bible’s various texts were written, while other methods are entirely

inappropriate and anachronistic. The catch is that we can't escape the anachronism of any method we might use: they are all imposed on a text whose conditions of production are simply beyond us and unknowable. So why not make it a virtue, as Bal does?

A similar foregrounding of what many would regard as a hurdle is her treatment of non-expert reading. Beginning with her biblical work in the 1980s, Bal points out that most of her critical and creative activity has been in fields where she is not at home – biblical studies, art criticism (Rembrandt, Caravaggio), film production and photography. All that might be claimed as her proper discipline is the 1985 book on narratology. Now we can add Qur'anic studies. How does she dare? Is she not aware that one must be saturated in a discipline in order to know the debates and issues? She does actually know more than she lets on, having read enough in each area to know what is going on and often setting herself against it. But the non-expert position is one she likes, for it gives her that crucial outsider position, able to see things that insiders characteristically cannot. It also needs a good deal of confidence that one's hunches are worth pursuing.

Except when she discusses Sura 12 in the Qur'an. Although Bal tries to make a virtue of 'reading with ignorance', Chapter Six falters and becomes rather uncertain in the search for what she calls a Qur'anic semiotics. There are more references here than in the rest of the book combined. She combs some secondary texts for hints and possibilities, constantly verges on an apology for daring to interpret the Qur'an and tries to hard to show that she has actually read a lot. It seems all too obvious that Bal is aware of the sensitivities that attach to a northern European like herself engaging with the Qur'an. After all, this is the part of the world that has become neurotic about Islam, gradually closing one lot of borders after another, throwing out 'Arabs' whenever possible, and showing all the signs of entering into a decline where one assumes that the golden age lies in the past. I would suggest that the trace of this situation is all too strong in Bal's text. What would it have looked like, I wonder, had she been from Bulgaria, where there are centuries of strong Muslim presence, or indeed Turkey just across the border? I was hoping for a much stronger reading, as is Bal's usual approach, one that made much more of the way Western literature like that of Thomas Mann is unthinkable without the Qur'an.

One penultimate and slightly unrelated comment: for anyone who has engaged in translation of biblical texts and pondered the complex issues associated with it, the opening translation of Genesis 19 is jarring. It is an effort to follow the Hebrew syntax slavishly. The result is to produce a translation that makes one stop and ask what is going on. Which is of course the purpose – a deeply literalistic translation that follows her path of literalism (see above). But why select only a few verses (7-9, 11, 14, 20)? If it is her own 'version', then say so. Later there are some further comments on the reason for doing so, as well as acknowledged debts to Buber and Rosenschweig's very literal translation, the King James version and a Hebrew text. I really miss some engagement with Walter Benjamin, who argued for very different reasons for precisely such an approach to translation (it is to be interlinear so that it approaches pure language).

Despite these last two points on the Qur'an and translation, it is a thoroughly engaging book, the sort that only Mieke Bal can write. Full of sparks and good ideas, I enjoyed it. I do suspect my sense of these insights was actually generated by Bal's style of sprinkling key moments of the book with narratives of personal insight, whether the memory of hearing the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife as a child in a Catholic school, or when she first saw a Rembrandt painting closely, or a comment from her brother, and so on. Precisely because these moments provide a

glimpse as to how a great interpreter of all manner of texts works, the book is worth a careful read.