

**DOGMAS
IN LITERATURE
AND LITERARY
MISSIONARY**

TEXT, READER AND CRITIQUE

Edited by

Önder Çakırtaş

Bingol University, Türkiye

Series in Literary Studies



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I would like to thank Associate Professor Betüre Memmedova, who pioneered this book. Thanks to her guidance and assistance, I was able to call for the book, and the participants contributed. Huge thanks to all contributors to this book.

I am also grateful to my beloved wife and children, whose time and energy I have wasted.

Preface

The emergence of this text was inspired by the discussions that I had with my dear professor Betüre Memmedova, sometimes face-to-face, mostly by phone and e-mail. We both love literature, and I think this love occasionally drags us into the middle of heated debates on literature. Sometimes we have agreed, sometimes we have been quite at odds with each other. But we produce literature, which – I think – is the best ending to this adventure.

This book has gone through a rough route. The limitations of the subject necessitated me not to include many texts, especially after the peer review. For this reason, a book-length study with few chapters was formed on the way of choosing effective texts.

While I was writing the introduction to the book, a massive earthquake hit Southern Türkiye that partially affected the city I was in. We had many losses. Onur Ekler and Seçil Erkoç Iqbal, two of the contributors to this book, were also located in the earthquake zone, and Onur Ekler was directly affected and injured by the earthquake. In this difficult and necessary progression, we have nevertheless managed to finish this book. For this reason, I would like to attribute this book to those who struggle even in the worst of times.

In memory of my student Meliha Çam and all earthquake victims...

Bingöl, April 2023

Introduction: Literary Blindness and Conviction: The Dogmatics of Literature and the Politics of Literary Missionary

Önder Çakırtaş

Bingöl University, Türkiye

In *Literature and Dogma*, Matthew Arnold discusses the inevitability of reading religious books, especially the Bible, with a scientific and literary interpretation rather than a dogmatic one and comments upon the “*precision and definiteness* of religious thought” (4) as described by the *Guardian* to refer to dogmatic theology. Arnold’s curiosity for religious readings covers rhetoric about what kind of interpretation literature involves and perhaps deserves. So, one of the questions that plague one’s critical mind in Arnold’s discussion is, ‘is literature *precise* and *definite*?’ A likely answer to this question would probably lead to completely differing dilemmas and questions. Two of the most crucial inquiries that might arise are ‘is literature dogmatic?’ and ‘are there dogmas in literature?’

It would be appropriate to turn to what and how literature commentators and readers have experienced to seek answers to these questions. Marxist scholar Terry Eagleton, to give an example on defining literature, argues that literature has a controversial mission when dealing with *factual* and *fictional*, and that for a very long time, some authors have argued that literature is a vehicle of two distinct carters that tell historical facts on the one side, and cover fiction on the other (1-2). What emerges here is not the role of literature as a truth-teller but rather a lasting impression it leaves on readers. How literature is interpreted is shaped by the narratives and intertextual accounts of the new literary and literature-based texts. The text, as an ultimate product of the perception formed in the mind of its creator, performs another possible mental transformation. It is here that literature seems to serve a mission of transmitters that become, regardless of their position, literary ambassadors and missionaries. However, the power of literature in perception might play a sharp *definite* role as soon as it goes beyond admiration. At this stage, the readers, in proportion to the power created in their own perception, turn into a missionary of literature and immerses themselves in literary dogmas. The resilience/transience of literature in perception may transform the interpreter, reader, and analyst into a hermit as well as a militant. The adventure of reading, which begins with the experience of taking pleasure, takes a course towards the construction of literary dogmas.

This comes to what Roland Barthes suggests as a kind of critical framework of pleasure in reading. As Mary H. Snyder puts forward, "In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes discusses the pleasure in reading a text, but he is careful not to encourage readers to become controlled by the texts they read" (110). Such a powerful practice of control can be explained by literature's ability to overwhelm and capture the reader. But the position in which the reader places themselves might exemplify that literature has evolved the mind towards a dogmatic mechanism.

The existence of dogmas in literature becomes visible depending on the readers' positioning themselves as regards the gradual standardization and hegemonic domination of dogmatized criticism. Quite frankly, in his defence of the New Criticism in *The Criticism and Truth*, Barthes mentions the subtle difference between the critic and the judge and discusses how the literary commentator's attitude in criticism puts forward an approach to making sense of language. So much so that the meaning of a new text written by reinterpretation might, as Barthes puts it, "open the way to unforeseeable relaying of meaning" as long as "the true 'criticism' of institutions and languages does not consist in 'judging' them, but in *perceiving, separating, dividing*" (3). The focal issue may arise from the fact that the literary readers and commentators might not realize whether they are a critic or a judge where they position themselves. It may also be due to the fact that literary readers and commentators have surrendered themselves to common fashion and have had to submit to the mainstream to a great extent. If, for instance, the idea or what is signified is shaped by a narrative of an idolized or cult author, literary tabooization and dogmatization take on more and more rapid precedence.

Frank Ritchie, in his revealing essay 'Literary Dogma' emphasizes, "A creed, so long as it is merely the expression of the genuine belief of an individual, is innocent enough," (535) and he continues, "but when it is put forth with the sanction of a well-known name, and when its promulgator is inspired with a missionary spirit, it is apt to exercise an unwholesome influence" (535). There are, of course, various instances of such kind of missionary in the literature. Virginia Woolf, for instance, wrote stupendous works that turned out to be well-known, and in 1928 she delivered a lecture at Cambridge University, where women were once not allowed, that formed the basis for the celebrated *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Her metaphorical wit, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," (4) which she ingeniously expressed in her work, has been recognized as a cult by various people, especially suffragette writers, and women, and practically everyone seems to be blindly attached to the idea that 'a woman without room and money cannot write'. But does this 'blindly' acceptance have to do with the fact that Woolf was already a famed writer when she proclaimed this history-defying motto? Probably, the

answer is yes. Undoubtedly, Woolf is quite right when she claims that a woman writer, if she desires to be an authoress, should have a room of her own and a salary or money of her own. However, it does not mean that otherwise, female writers cannot write. There are a huge number of examples to claim the opposite. The Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, to mention but a few, never had a room of their own. Even Simone de Beauvoir herself confesses that “I didn’t have a room of my own. In fact, I had nothing at all” (qtd. in Gobeil). Interestingly, even those who could afford a room of their own, preferred other ways of ‘accommodation’. Maya Angelou, for instance, wrote mainly in a hotel room; Tony Morrison wrote with a paper on her lap. Fortunately, there are recently a number of notes against this statement. One of them is by Ida Rae Egli, titled *No Rooms of their Own* for which Raymond F. Wood wrote a review and added some more names who did not have their own room but survived to write.

A case might be made out for Dame Shirley, writing from her log cabin at Indian Bar, where things might have been a bit tight, and a spare room was probably not available, and certainly for poor Lucy Young, an Indian girl who was captured and sold into “apprenticeship” (slavery) by renegade whites, but who lived to dictate her memories later on in life. (139)

However, the most poignant is Asja Bakic’s ‘Not All Writers Can Afford Rooms of Their Own’. She rents a flat, and that’s what she says: “Had Virginia Woolf been forced to walk Mayor Bandic’s gravelly paths in search of inspiration, her cult essay would’ve sounded quite different” (Bakic).

More remarkably, one of the rudiments that makes up the socio-cultural and every so often political aesthetics of dogmatic literature might be the ones that shape the literary theories. Doing a comprehensive study on this subject, Sára Tóth suggests some stimulating views on this. In her article specifically devoted to Northrop Frye’s views on literary theory, Tóth presents the literary and dogmatic interpretations of religious texts on the basis of Christianity and underlines that “literary or poetic language, the language of story and image, takes precedence over the dogmatic or conceptual interpretations of texts” (185). At first glance, this view may seem counter-intuitive to the one we consider in this book. However, the author discusses the power of literary words on the reader, based on Frye’s critical texts, and writes about the mystical power of literary elements uses theories to overcome even dogmatic thoughts in religious texts. As she emphasizes somewhere, “considering that it is literary or poetic language that can sustain such paradoxes (see Frye, *Words with Power* 109), it is not surprising that mystics, otherwise respectful of the creeds, repeatedly turned to literary devices to describe experiences often at odds with official dogma” (187). This enchanting and overpowering supremacy of words can, in a literary sense, feed people’s dogmatic passion for literature. As such,

literary theories can be part of this 'dogma' climate. Roland Barthes's 1967 essay on an introductory literary theory, for example, 'La mort de l'auteur' ('The Death of the Author'), can be reckoned as one of them to which some readers have developed a dogmatic commitment. It seems so unfair and unjust towards writers. In the same vein, some scholars vehemently protested against those who applied this conflicting theory to Shakespeare. "Does it matter who wrote his works" (Mena 14) exclaimed some critics considering the opposite view sceptically. And that is what is dangerous: to consider all the literary theories by prominent critics and philosophers unchallenging. Recently, even very reputable writers and critics do not consider the theory very reliable and state that "the time for the dead author is over. Now is the age of Living Dead authors" (Erikson). After all, one should not forget that theory does not mean 'it is', rather, it means 'it might be'. This theory is good for experimenting. Several academics used it at the exams giving students modernist or realist texts without mentioning the writer and having them determine the literary movement and genres, but to kill the author is not to kill everything? The meaning of the text goes through the words and it is the author himself who primarily gives meaning to the word.

Examples abound. Indisputably, one of the most vital hitches that arise is connected to the 'reader's intention'. In a way, it is the reader who undertakes the missionary role of the literary text. To put this in two exemplary questions, does every text in which Western writers treat Easterners have an Orientalist point of view? Or does the reader produce it? Does the work of every woman writer have feminist elements? How exactly do biases work in the interpretation of a text? How does the reader's intention affect the fate of the text? Or how accessible is the idea that a text, whether lyrical or prose, is shaped entirely or indirectly by the reader's emotions? Taking all this into account, an inevitable question arises: do literary readers/scholars become blind as they are trapped in the depths of literature? To an astonishing extent, in various literary texts, characters who have been enlightened as a result of their trials with books and wisdom have become physically and often metaphorically blinded. In *Oedipus the King*, while Oedipus allegorically pays for the 'blindness' concealed in his wisdom, Marlowe's book monster Dr. Faustus takes the stage with a different metaphor of blindness. Readers then become blinded to the extent that they immerse themselves in the magic words of literature. A woman reading Woolf suddenly thinks that 'a woman without a room cannot write', while a reader of Faustus may blindly wage war on words to find a way to be arguable with God. Thus, Barthes' critical warning resonates: the necessity of paying attention to not to be controlled by literature. What Kenneth Jernigan proposes as 'Is literature against us?', then sounds reasonable.

The literary record reveals no single theme or unitary view of the life of the blind. Instead, it displays a bewildering variety of images—often conflicting and contradictory, not only as between different ages or cultures, or among the works of various writers, but even within the pages of a single book. (Jernigan)

Literature, then, is mind-directed as much as it is directing the mind. Blindness occurs when this trick manipulates the mind. Thus, literature becomes a dogmatic cult. It is about how the author and/or reader-writer who undertake the task of a literary missionary can take ownership of the text to which they are blindly attached; that is, to borrow the term Edward Said has emphasized at one point, this is about “the curriculum and the ideology of study” (128).

The nature of the book consists of titles that meticulously address the possible answers to several questions proposed above. In this respect, not only reader-centered but also author-centered dogmatic elements have been examined by different academics with original ways of thinking and writing. The skeleton of the book is built around two main topics. Part one, titled ‘Toward Monopolized Literature: The Dogmatization of Fiction and Theory’, covers, in general, sub-chapters that examine the dogmatization of literature around the idea of monopolization of thought in literature and theories. Part two, ‘Literary Representation and Literary Missionary of Dogma’, covers studies that examine the ‘missionary’ role of various texts on the representation of dogma in literature and, thus, the authors of these literary texts. The style and analysis of each author allows readers to produce different meanings through the ‘dogmatization of literature’ and to witness how the mind is manipulated.

It will be a little exaggeration to state that the topic of literary dogma has so far received short shrift from literary critics as well as from academics. This being the case, the percentage of submitted critical chapters is encouraging. They demonstrate a great interest in the issue. In the first part, there are three chapters. In the first chapter of this part, Kristen Schiedel discusses post-criticism, or amateurism, as “a methodology that is well-positioned to challenge academic dogma as it may occur in literary studies” (8) Schiedel explains his point in the context of the relation of knowledge with experience, as, to him, knowledge evolves into power and thus leads to the formation of dogmatic academic theories. In the following subdivision, Yesim and Beture’s essay provides a detailed discussion of some dogmatic views and attitudes by foremost modernist writers Virginia Woolf and Vladimir Nabokov. The authors refute their oft-quoted statements and claims, which have been considered axiomatic and unquestionable.

The second part of the book begins with a thought-provoking chapter by Seçil Erkoç Iqbal, who takes an undogmatic approach based on binary oppositions in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The author, who almost *deconstructs* deconstructive criticism around elements that do not adopt dogmatic approaches, offers examples of the non-dogmatic nature of binary oppositions as represented in the aforementioned piece. In the second chapter, which reveals one of the most interesting parts of the book, Onur Ekler explains the genesis and evolutionary dogmas of the European theatre with the unshakable foundation of the Aristotelian tradition. The author claims that thanks to pioneering figures such as Bertolt Brecht, who revolutionized modern theatre, theatre meets an un-dogmatic tradition, and argues that with the introduction of modern subjectivities to European theatre, it began to be purged of Aristotelian representations and abandoned dogmas. In the next chapter, Sezgi Öztıp Haner critiques dogma as a religious image and a metaphorical object. Discussing the dogmatism of Christianity around sexism in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, the author makes interesting remarks on the dogmatization of general gender roles in the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity. In the last chapter, Raj and Kumar analyse Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses and Serawit Bekele Debele's modes of state control of religion to perform a comparative study of Rastafarianism in Jamaica and Bokononism (a fictitious religion) in San Lorenzo (a fictitious banana republic in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*). In the chapter, the authors revisit the postcolonial state injustices in the two nations, compare the religious icons (Bob Marley and Bokonon) of the oppressed and their differing religious responses to the state, and go on to show how religion and religious dogma can be appropriated to act for or against the state.

Last but not least, it is hoped that the book will, to some extent, fill the gap and serve as a motivation for further research in this field.

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Contributors

Önder Çakırtaş is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Bingöl University, Türkiye. His research interests centre around Political and Psychological Literature. He particularly specializes in Modern and Contemporary British Drama and Literature with a keen interest in Political Theatre, Minority Theatre, Ethnic Theatre, and Race-Oriented Theatre. In the 2018-19 academic year, he was a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Roehampton in London. Currently writing his book *Staging Muslims in Britain: Playwriting, Performance and Representation* (contracted with Routledge, 2023), Çakırtaş has prolifically written some recent works such as 'Racializ-ed/ing identities on Stage: Muslims, Angst and Response in *Snokered* and *Does My Bomb Look Big in this?*' (*Performing Islam*, Volume 10, Numbers 1-2, December 2021, pp. 5-21); 'Islamized Class and 'the Infidel Within' the British Drama: Contemporary British Muslim Theatre Around Race, Colour and Faith' (in *Class Acts: Material Relations and Performance Aesthetics*, Ed. Elizabeth Tomlin, Methuen Bloomsbury, 2023); 'Islam, Identity and 'New Otherness': Muslim Playwrights and Islamic Performances in Early Twenty-first Century Britain' (in *Muslim Writing, Writing Muslimness in Europe: Transcultural Literary Approaches*- Eds. Carmen Zamorano Llena et al., Routledge, 2023). His latest book *Ten ve Kimlik: Çağdaş Siyahi İngiliz Tiyatrosu* [Skin Colour and Identity: Contemporary Black British Theatre], was published in late 2020. His latest edited book, *Language, Power and Ideology in Political Writing*, was published by IGI Global in Pennsylvania in late 2019. His other recent publications include a play-specific exercise that demonstrates how performance illuminates close reading of Wole Soyinka's *Death and a King's Horseman* (with Miriam Chirico) (edited by Miriam Chirico, Kelly Younger, published by Bloomsbury in 2020), an analysis of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* in relation to patriography and pathography (published by Peter Lang in Oxford), and an edited book on analysis of the link between literature and psychology published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. He has published in numerous journals including *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, *Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, *Forum for World Literature Studies*, *Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty of Letters*. Çakırtaş is the founding editor of *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature and Drama Studies*. He is also among the editorial members of *The Journal of British Muslim Studies*. (SOAS, University of London).

Kristen Schiedel is a Ph.D. Candidate at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Her specialization is in world literature, and her dissertation research focuses on care and burnout. Kristen is especially interested in the kind of care that individuals are called upon to provide in order to fill systemic gaps and the way this care often asks of those individuals that they go beyond what they have the capacity for in terms of time, energy, and other resources. Her work is interdisciplinary and follows an amateur and post-critical approach.

Assist. Prof. Dr. **Yeşim Sultan Akbay** is currently working in the Department of English Language and Literature at Süleyman Demirel University, Isparta—Türkiye. At present, she is conducting lectures on 19th, 20th, and Contemporary British Novels and Women's Literature. Her interest area includes psychology and philosophy of literature as well as the life-writing genre.

Assoc. Professor **Beture Memmedova**, from Azerbaijan, worked as a Visiting Instructor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Süleyman Demirel University, teaching English Literature, including 19th-century novels, Modernism, Virginia Woolf and Biofiction, from 1998 up to 2022.

Seçil Erkoç Iqbal is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Western Languages and Literatures, İnönü University, Türkiye. She received her B.A. (2010) from the Department of Western Languages and Literatures at Boğaziçi University. She had her M.A. degree (2013) in English Language and Literature at İstanbul University, where she studied Aldous Huxley's *Island* and John Fowles' *The Magus*. During her graduate studies, she worked as a Research Assistant at İstanbul University and then at Hacettepe University where she got her PhD from the English Language and Literature Department with her dissertation entitled “‘Out of the Maze of Dualisms’: Posthuman Space in Mario Petrucci and Alice Oswald's Poetry” in 2020. Her research interests include Contemporary Nature Poetry, English Novel, Ecological Posthumanism, Comparative Literature, Contemporary Literary Theories, and Criticism.

Onur Ekler is a lecturer in the English department at Mustafa Kemal University. He earned his Ph.D. from Erciyes University. His work focuses specifically on chaos, anarchy, and Self in modernist/postmodernist literary studies.

Ankit Raj is an assistant professor of English at Government College Gharanda, Karnal, and has a Ph.D. from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, Roorkee. His current research areas include Archetypal and Myth Criticism, Comparative Literature, Postmodern Fiction, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and Posthumanism, on which he has published research articles in Routledge and Johns Hopkins University Press journals. He is an editor with *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature and Drama Studies* and also edits *The Hooghly Review*. A former engineer and rock band vocalist,

Ankit is a poet and short fiction writer published in print, online, audio, video, and comic strip formats in over thirty magazines, journals, and anthologies across ten countries. His book reviews have appeared in *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi) and *Ink Sweat & Tears*. He is the author of the poetry collection *Pinpricks* (Hawakal, 2022). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4565-7682>; Twitter: @ankit_raj01

Nagendra Kumar is a Professor (HAG) and former Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, Roorkee. He has published over 120 research articles in reputed national and international journals, conference proceedings, and edited anthologies, and has delivered talks in about fifty institutions across the globe, including in India, Austria, Oman, Singapore, Canada, Switzerland, Poland, Czech Republic, Denmark, and Egypt. He has been a Fellow of the Salzburg Seminar, Austria, and is the recipient of multiple academic awards, including the Outstanding Teacher Award at IIT Roorkee for the year 2015. A professional trainer specialising in language, literature, communication, and soft skills, Nagendra has trained around 2000 professionals from academia and industry in the areas of Professional and Corporate Communication, Soft Skills, Leadership, Human Resource Management, Time Management, Stress Management, Self-management, Professional Writing, etc. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8292-7947>; Twitter: @prof_nagendra

Sezgi Öztop Haner has been an English language instructor for over a decade at Dumlupınar University in Kütahya, Türkiye. She got her M.A. degree from Dumlupınar University, the Department of English Language and Literature. She holds a doctoral degree from English Culture and Literature, Atılım University, in 2020, with her dissertation entitled “Beyond Sexuality: Transgender Bodies in the Novels of Virginia Woolf, Angela Carter, and Jeanette Winterson.” Dr. Öztop Haner has participated in many international and national conferences and published original articles in the area of her studies. Her research interests include sexuality and gender studies, transgender theory, cultural studies, critical theory, and women’s writing.