Tony K. Stewart. 2019. *Witness to Marvels. Sufism and Literary Imagination.* Oakland: University of California Press. 300 pages. ISBN 978-0-52030-633-2. Price: $39.95. Available from: www.luminosoa.org. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.76

The scope of the monograph *Witness to Marvels. Sufism and Literary Imagination* is not as broad as the title might suggest; it focuses exclusively on the fantastic world of the legendary *pīrs,* the *sūphī*[1] saints of Bengal. The texts analysed in this book enter the category of *kathā* (fictional narration) that became popular with the advent of inexpensive printing in the late 19th century, although the stories are thought to have originated much earlier.

The content is divided in six chapters, in which the author intertwines his presentation of those extremely intricate narrations with their analysis and inscription in the general context of literary theory. The synopsis of several representative stories, featuring such figures as Satya Pīr, Mānik Pīr, Bonbibī or Baḍa Khān Gāji, is detailed, even painstaking, with frequent quotations in extenso. Such a work, requiring also from the reader a considerable amount of patience, is fully justified, since the texts brought into the limelight are not known to the wider academic audience and have been marginalised, if not ignored, in the existing scholarship. In the Preface, Tony K. Stewart speaks of *agnotology,* "the study of our intellectual blind spots" (xiv); undoubtedly, the study of those fantastic adventures standing so far from any Islamic orthodoxy may be seen as an agnotological exercise. What is more, the appreciation of such a peculiar form of literature is an important contribution to a more encompassing and profound understanding of the Islamic culture composing the whole that Shahab Ahmed has recently qualified as the Balkans-to-Bengal complex.[2]

On the other hand, a painstaking account of all the marvellous intricacies is an indispensable preliminary step toward the appreciation of the imaginary world these narrations create. This is why, in Chapter One, the reader is confronted with the endless meanders of Satya Pīr's conception and miraculous double birth, first from the womb of his mother, Cāndbibī (who descended from heaven especially to give birth to the saint), and then from a turtle's egg. The detail that Cāndbibī was

[1] The author uses a specific Bangla transliteration also for the terms that are equally applied to other areas of the Islamicate world. Such a convention serves to underline strictly localised understanding of these terms, whose semantic fields in the Bengali context do not correspond exactly to their general, universalised meaning.

[2] Cf. Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2016.

impregnated as she inhaled the fragrance of a special flower sent to her by God while she was bathing in a river gives the taste of the peculiar type of imagination and idiosyncratic logical structure characterising the *kathā.*

Chapter Two brings forth the story of Mānik Pīr that serves as a further exemplification of the genre of Bengali hagiographic narration that the author analyses in terms of autotelic fiction, criticizing the judgement of conservative reformers, ready to dismiss those tales as sheer nonsense. Inadvertently, those Orientalists who failed to pay sufficient scholarly attention to this form of culture and the specific dimension of Islamic experience in Bengal of which it testifies subscribe for this misconception. Meanwhile, Tony K. Stewart strives to overcome the idiosyncrasy of the typically Bengali cultural expression connecting *kathā* with the Western tradition of literary theory and criticism, quoting such names as Tzvetan Todorov (that appear in this context as a theoretician of the marvellous) and Northrop Frye. Frye's classical book, *The Secular Scripture,* serves as a good starting point for the study of Bengali texts, since it is especially concerned with the narrative structure; this is why the theory, popular among the scholars of European literature in the 1970s and 1980s, is regarded as a valid legacy, ready to be employed in a new context. Just to give an example, the points of coincidence between Frye's conclusions and the Bengali stories may imply such narrative elements as divine interventions to impel the action or cases of lost identity leading to gender confusion.

Also the following chapters are built upon quite a well-known theoretical basis, created, among others, by Linda Hutcheon dealing with such concepts as intertextuality and parody. Nonetheless, the use of those rather traditional, routine theoretical approaches in literary studies remains productive, since the material that Tony K. Stewart offers to the reader is so fresh and unexplored. Establishing the link between the well-known (theory) and the unknown (analysed texts), the author inscribes the Bengali literature in a broad context and overcomes its marginalisation. Certainly, the association of *kathā* with the genre that the Western literary critics qualified as *romance* may be seen as a form of Eurocentrism. Yet on the other hand, the imaginary world of *pīrs* and *bibīs* finds its idiosyncratic expression due to the use of the same narrative strategies and genres that remain at the heart of such literary traditions as the Sanskrit epic *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata,* the Persian *Shāh Nāmeh,* as well as Buddhist tales. If there is a hidden universalist stance in Stewart's book, this literary universalism is at least not entirely Eurocentric.

The story of Badar Pīr analysed in the Chapter Three, in which local gods and goddesses seem to coexist with Islamic imagination of angels and the Prophet as a direct interlocutor of God, is presented as a parody, rather than an example of syncretism, a term with which Tony K. Stewart remains cautious. To resume and simplify the author's argument, the adventures of Badar are shown as parallel

to the *vaiṣṇav* mythology speaking of the diverse avatars of Viṣṇu or the amorous relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. Badar Pīr charms the women, attracted by his personal charisma, just as gallant Kṛṣṇa would do, in spite of his mission implying ascetic practices. He offers first fruits to Āllā, in parallel to the *pūjā* offered to *hinduyāni* gods and goddesses. The coincidence is analysed in terms of parody rather than hypothetical fusion of religious beliefs or interpenetration of their imaginary worlds. Building upon the well-known conclusions of Bakhtin, the author argues that establishing an intertextual relationship with an older convention or precursor narration, the Islamicised version provides a critique of the parodied material: the new text "disturbs and reveals the gaps in prevailing ideologies" (92). What is more, such a criticism is bivalent, since the tales counting the lives of imaginary *pīrs* may also parody the hagiographic narrations of the historical ones, those actually involved in the propagation of Islam.

Subscribing for the conclusions that had been formulated by Linda Hutcheon, Tony K. Stewart treats the parody as a testimony of cultural sophistication, since it relies on considerable competence of the public. He associates the tales of the *sūphī* saints with the great movement of vernacularization in Bengal, once again leading the reader quite far away from the dismissive attitude toward the *pīr kathā* that arguably used to characterise both the Islamic reformers and the Orientalists. Be that as it may, the proper appreciation of the analysed material requires, as Tony K. Stewart argues, an awareness of the ironic dimension of the text, delivering a critique of the prevailing discourse present in its social and cultural background.

Still in the Chapter Three, an interesting passage is dedicated to the analysis of the possible relationship between the imaginary physiology evoked in *pīr kathā* texts and esoteric *tantrik* traditions. Tony K. Stewart proposes to treat the matter as a sort of elaborate literary joke having no other meaning and aim than just to held up to ridicule the "twilight language" *(sandhya bhāṣā)* used by certain categories of people: "[...] the apparent technical expressions are a kind of pidgin mumbo jumbo, a parody of twilight language [...]. In much the same manner as the gesture toward linguistically unviable Arabic versions of the *shahāda* [...], these riddles may not indicate a specific content, but true to their fictional quality, allude to a type of understanding that would always be obscure to the reader or listener, but would be immediately identifiable as part of an esoteric discourse of *sūphīs* and other ascetic groups – expressions intended to mystify because ordinary readers or auditors could never be expected to understand" (107).

In Chapter Four, using the metaphorical key concept of "mapping the *Imaginaire,*" the author discusses the intersection between the self-contained textual world and local geography and history. Once again, this attempt at exploring the frontier between the "fictional" and the "real" is indebted to

the literary studies of the 1970s and the 1980s; it might be seen, to a considerable extent, as anachronistic in today's humanities, were it not for the freshness of the Bengali material brought into the limelight. The central figure of this chapter, a female saint Bonbibī, heroine of Mohāmmad Kather's *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* (a late-nineteenth-century production), captivates the attention of the reader not only because of the gender variation of the *pīr kathā* predominant scheme and Bonbibī's impersonation of the matriarchal authority, but partially also because of her presence in the Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* and her importance for the present day environmental discourse in the Sunderban mangrove swamps. Once again, the analysis points out to the parodistic dimension of the text; namely, the tale parodies the genre of *maṅgal kāvya* romance.

Chapter Five focuses on yet another story circulating in various versions attested between the 18th and the 19th century: that of Baḍa Khān Gāji. Also in this case, the network of intertextual connections is dense. Tony K. Stewart links it to *Rāmāyaṇa* and the tales of Gaurī and Hara, and also to the Persian figure of Rostam and more generally, to the culture of *bazm* and *razm,* feasting and fighting. The conclusions of this chapter lead toward the reflection on the intersemiotic nature of the process that not only creates vernacular translation of Arabic and Persian concepts, but also inscribes them in shared metaphoric worlds defined by Roman Jakobson. The intersemiotic dimension of those translated concepts extends to intersecting mythologies, rituals and theologies.

Finally, the last chapter deals with the pragmatics of *pīr kathā* and its importance for a social discourse that goes beyond the usual Hindu-Muslim binary. The author completes his analysis of the autotelic, self-contained imaginary narration with its inscription in the identity politics of Bengal across the last two centuries. Obviously, the phantasmagoric tales are very distant from the orthodox Islamic world view; nonetheless, the author concludes that they convey some general notions and ideals such as that of religious commitment. The texts operate through symbolic images, as well as the very process of intertextuality and parody analysed in previous chapters: "To invoke a precursor is to engage with its presuppositions, positively or negatively, to share or share in part its positions on key cosmological and pragmatic issues, which inevitably formulate an ethical position. As a result, these parodies mimic, for better or worse, the beliefs and practices that are associated with those other texts in the ordinary world of things" (190). The holy heroes and heroines of the stories, "key technicians of the sacred" as Tony K. Stewart calls them (193), foster a constant negotiation of standards in a multi-religious context characterised by a plurality of ethnic and social distinctions, modes of behaviour, rules and obligations.

Being such a detailed presentation of a textual corpus that is virtually unknown to the larger academic audience, Stewart's book makes a slow reading, addressed to the specialists in the first place.

Yet on the other hand, the author invests a lot of effort in such a contextualisation of his material that might foster its inclusion in the larger landscape of world literature and literary criticism. Undoubtedly, these aspects make his monograph a truly groundbreaking endeavour, even if it is not entirely free of shortcomings; constant reference to classical literary theory, with no visible effort of introducing state-of-the-art approaches may eventually be seen as one. Nevertheless, the book opens a new, fascinating field of exploration.

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