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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION A: Language & Literature

A Conceptual Metaphor Analysis of Selected Proverbs in Aliyu Kamal's Silence and a Smile

Mustapha Ibrahim Garba, PhD & Sakina Wada **1-15**

Repositioning Reading through Multimodality in English Language Teaching

Suku Hyellamada Kenan, PhD, Aishatu Bello Umar & Hannatu Joseph Bega **16-30**

Dislocation and Renegotiation: Postcolonial Belonging in Cry, the Beloved Country, Paradise, Bird Summons, and Wahala

Musa Ahmad Sani & Abdullahi Dahiru Umar, PhD **31-41**

Reconfiguring Belief: Religion, Culture, and Displacement in Postcolonial and Diasporic Fiction

Abdullahi Dahiru Umar, PhD & AbdulAzeez Lawal, PhD **42-54**

An Exploration Of Stylistic and Literary Devices In Tess Onwueme's The Broken Calabash

Abdulrahman Idris Abdulwaheed, PhD & Sani Saidu **55-74**

Borrowing and Code-Switching among Hausa-English Speakers in the North Eastern Nigeria: A phonological analysis

Hamidou Bappa, PhD & Theodore Bebey, PhD **75-89**

Disillusionment and Commitment: a Reader – Reception Study of Elma Shaw's Redemption Road

Abdurrazak Abubakar & Sani Isma'il Abubakar **90-103**

Contextual Use of English in Nigerian Motivational Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Selected Speeches

Aishatu Bello Umar & Malata Andrew Zakayo, PhD **104-113**

English Language In Nigeria, Past, Present And The Future: a Concerned Issue

John O, Udeigwe Ph.D **114-124**

The Interface between Morphosyntax, Language Development and Its Sustainability: A Case Study of Bura Verbal Group

Mshelbwala Comfort Usman **125-143**



Digital Folklore And Nation-Building: Repurposing Indigenous Verbal Arts For
Cultivating Civic Realignment And Social Stability Among Nigerian Youths

Shehu Yahuza Abbas & Shema'u Abubakar Umar

144-159

Algorithmic Reclamation: Digital Resources As Structural Instruments For
Countering Linguistic Imperialism Among Indigenous Language Teachers

Shehu Yahuza Abbas & Ibrahim Muhammed Ogah

160-173

Bi-Implication and Negative Markers in Atiku Abubakar's 2023 Presidential
Declaration Speech

Sani Saidu & Umar Amos Hadiya

174-196

Comparative Analysis of English and Tangle Fricative Phonemes for Pedagogical
Implications to the Tangle English Speakers

Malata Andrew Zakayo, PhD & Angela Butack

197-224

Writing the Posthuman: Artificial Intelligence, Literature, and the Metaphysics of
Relation in the Digital Age

Tarr, Mathias & Fatima, Inuwa S. Gara, PhD

225-233

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Code-Switching and Code-Mixing in Selected
Episodes of *Jenifa's Diary*

Apasi Marizukot Ahuoyiza & Adamu Idris, PhD

234-248

A Linguistic Analysis of Language Evolution in Digital Communication

Ibrahim Sofiyat Temitope & Adamu Idris, PhD

249-269

SECTION B:

Gudunmawar Turawa Da Manazarta 'Yan Kasa Ga Ayyukan Al'Adun Hausawa Daga
1965 Zuwa Yau

Ibrahim Garba Nayaya (Baba) & Danlami Bala Gwammaja, PhD

270-287

Ashe Kunya Ba a Ido Kadai Take Ba: Sake Bitar Fulaku Ga Fulanin Zamani Da Suka
Yi Kaka Gida a Kasar Hausa

**Abdullahi Usman Garko, Abubakar Mohammed Gombe, PhD &
Shamsuddeen Ismaila**

288-295



SECTION C: Creative Writing

Poems for *Gombe Savannah: Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies*

Ismail Bala

296-300

Under the Mango Tree

Fatima Ibrahim Usman

301-303



Reconfiguring Belief: Religion, Culture, and Displacement in Postcolonial and Diasporic Fiction

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Abstract

*This article examines how religious identity is constructed and renegotiated under displacement in Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*, Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*, and Nikki May's *Wahala*. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and Third Space and Stuart Hall's model of identity as positioning, I trace a trajectory from territorial dispossession under apartheid and German imperialism to networked precarity in contemporary Nigerian-British London. The paper argues that spatial dispossession, economic coercion, and religious surveillance repeatedly destabilize cultural belonging, yet each context also produces distinct strategies of renegotiation through faith, ritual, language, and digital practice. Analysing doctrine, institution, crisis, and hybrid practice across the texts reveals religion as both a mechanism of judgment and a resource for agency. Ultimately, postcolonial religious identity emerges not as fixed inheritance but as a gendered, multilingual, and transacted production forged at the intersection of the sacred, the economic, and the digital.*

Keywords: postcolonial religion, displacement, hybridity, Third Space, self-orientalism.

Introduction

Religious belief in postcolonial and diasporic literature rarely appears as abstract theology. It is taught, performed, and audited within cultural codes of language, gender, labor, and law. This article therefore refuses to read faith as a private interiority divorced

from material conditions. Instead, it tracks faith as infrastructure — as something built, maintained, and policed across shifting terrains.

To do this, I read four Anglophone African and diasporic novels: Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994),



Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019), and May's *Wahala* (2022). The corpus moves from church and caravanserai to Highland pilgrimage and WhatsApp prayer chains, spanning apartheid South Africa, German colonial East Africa, post-diasporic Scotland, and digital Nigerian-British London. The span is deliberate. By juxtaposing 1948 and 2022, the article tests whether "postcolonial religion" names a coherent object, or whether displacement fractures it into historically specific idioms.

Postcolonial studies have often treated religion as residual tradition background noise to the real drama of race, nation, or capital. This article pushes back on that habit. It addresses a gap where doctrine, ritual, and institution are under-read as dynamic sites of economic, legal, and digital negotiation. By prioritising them as pedagogical technologies ways subjects are taught how to appear as legitimate believers the study shows that belonging is produced through faith practices that are simultaneously compliant and resistant. In other words, the article does not ask whether characters are "really" religious. It asks what religion is made to do when bodies cross borders.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century African and diasporic fiction registers successive

regimes of dislocation. First, territorial dispossession under mission Christianity and colonial capital. Then, nationalist exclusion. Now, contemporary precarity mediated by migration bureaucracy and digital platforms. In each regime, religion functions ambivalently. It provides ethical vocabulary and communal structure, yet it is co-opted by state, market, and patriarchal power to police bodies, speech, and mobility.

Cry, the Beloved Country situates Anglican mission Christianity within apartheid's racial hierarchy, where the pulpit both mourns and manages dispossession. *Paradise* locates Qur'anic ethics inside the caravan economy of German East Africa, where amanah, trusteeship, is monetised as rehani, collateral. *Bird Summons* relocates Sufi practice to secular Scotland, where Muslim women's professional identities stall and pilgrimage become a counter-practice to neoliberal selfhood. *Wahala* shifts to Pentecostal prosperity gospel in London, where seed-sowing, tithes, and WhatsApp groups convert piety into digital spectacle. Taken together, the novels do not offer a single story of secularization or revival. They map how the sacred travels with empire, capital, and code, mutating as it goes.



Existing scholarship on religion in postcolonial literature tends to bifurcate. One camp produces theological readings that treat faith as transcendental refuge, above history. Another offers materialist critiques that dismiss religion as ideological false consciousness, beneath history. This article is dissatisfied with both. The first risks depoliticizing faith; the second risks discarding it. Neither accounts for how religious identity is produced at the intersection of doctrine and displacement, nor how crisis generates new hybrid rituals.

The pedagogical role of institutions church, duka, mosque, megachurch, group chat in teaching subjects how to appear as legitimate believers remains undertheorised. This article treats institutions not as backdrop but as curriculum. The co-constitutive relationship between economic structures and ritual practice land, debt, remittance, tithes is rarely read as mutually formative. Here, the paper tracks money not as context for religion, but as liturgy.

The emergence of digital platforms as Third Spaces that both surveil and sustain faith has not been integrated into postcolonial theories of religion. By ending with WhatsApp and Instagram Live, the article argues that postcolonial theory must catch up to where belief now lives.

Thus, the central question is not “what do these characters believe?” but “how is belief assembled, audited, and recoded under pressure?” This article therefore asks how religious identity is constructed through doctrine, ritual, and institution; challenged by crisis and surveillance; and reconfigured through hybrid practice across successive spaces of displacement.

Theoretical Framework

This article adopts Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory of cultural negotiation and Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural identity as representation as its dual analytic lens. For Bhabha, colonial and postcolonial identity emerges in the “Third Space” of enunciation a liminal zone where cultural signs are translated and contested without resolving into synthesis. Within that space, mimicry describes the colonized subject’s repetition of dominant culture as “almost the same, but not quite,” an ambivalence that unsettles authority even as it appears to comply. Sly civility further names the tactical dissimulation through which subjects perform obedience while exceeding the control of empire, mission, or state. Hall complements this by rejecting essentialist notions of identity. He argues that cultural identity is not a fixed inheritance but “a



production” constituted within regimes of representation. Diasporic identity, for Hall, is made at “unstable points” of rupture and repositioning, where subjects are admitted or exiled by media, law, and institutional gazes. Taken together, Bhabha and Hall give this article a vocabulary for reading religion not as private belief but as public, contested performance.

Bhabha and Hall are necessary here because displacement forces religion out of the domain of theology and into the domain of visibility. When characters in Paton, Gurnah, Aboulela, and May are uprooted by apartheid, caravan economies, migration bureaucracy, or digital exile they must re-articulate faith under surveillance. Bhabha’s Third Space accounts for how doctrine and ritual mutate when church, mosque, or WhatsApp group become contact zones between unequal powers. Mimicry explains why a Black Anglican priest, a Swahili caravan boy, a Scottish Muslim pilgrim, or a London Pentecostal influencer all repeat dominant liturgies while bending them: their piety is “not quite” what the missionary, merchant, or algorithm expects. Hall’s regimes of representation explain how those performances are then judged who counts as a “real” Christian, Muslim, or believer in the eyes of the state, market, or social feed. Without

this dual lens, we would miss how faith is both a tool of management and a tactic of survival.

This article extends Bhabha and Hall by emphasising self-orientalism as a contemporary mode of mimicry. Self-orientalism describes the performance of cultural or religious difference for dominant gazes missionary, merchant, state, or digital audience in ways that risk commodifying piety as exotic or edifying spectacle. In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Kumalo’s sermons must sound “uplifting” to white liberals. In *Paradise*, Yusuf’s recitation must satisfy Arab traders and German officers. In *Bird Summons*, Salma’s Sufi retreat is filmed for secular British consumption. In *Wahala*, Ronke’s seed-sowing is broadcast on Instagram Live for tithes and likes. The theory thus reads religion as a site where belief is taught, audited, and remade under unequal power, and where the camera, pulpit, and ledger become interchangeable tools of authentication. Neither Bhabha nor Hall wrote primarily about digital religion, but their concepts of ambivalence and positioning anticipate how WhatsApp prayer chains and megachurch livestreams function as Third Spaces of enunciation.

This paper deliberately refuses two common evasions in literary studies of religion. The first is



theological reading, which treats faith as transcendental refuge and extracts characters from history. The second is vulgar materialism, which dismisses religion as false consciousness and extracts history from faith. By stressing analysis in Bhabha and Hall, the article insists that doctrine, ritual, and institution are pedagogical technologies they train subjects how to appear, speak, and transact as believers under duress. Land deeds, debt books, visa forms, and follower counts are not backdrop to belief; they are liturgical objects. The voice of this paper is therefore polemical: it argues that to study postcolonial religion is to study political economy, migration law, and platform design. To do otherwise is to misrecognize where power now lives.

Using Bhabha and Hall lets this article track continuity and rupture across 1948 to 2022 without flattening historical difference. Third Space explains why Anglican hymns in apartheid Natal and Pentecostal hashtags in Nigerian-British London are structurally related: both are enunciations produced under surveillance. Mimicry and sly civility explain how compliance and resistance cohabit in a single prayer, tithe, or post. Hall's production-of-identity model explains why crisis a son's arrest, a caravan bankruptcy, a pilgrimage breakdown, a viral

scandal becomes a generative moment where subjects reposition themselves within new regimes of representation. Indeed, the theory does not apply theory to literature. It argues that the novels themselves theorize. Paton, Gurnah, Aboulela, and May stage religion as a transacted, gendered, and multilingual practice. This article's job is to listen to that staging with concepts adequate to its complexity.

Analysis and Discussion

Religious identity in the four texts is not inherited but taught through what Stuart Hall terms "regimes of representation" that admit or exile subjects within dominant codes (Hall 225). This paper insists that belief is curriculum, not essence. In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Anglican doctrine, liturgy, and pastoral office construct Stephen Kumalo as umfundisi. His authority is institutional: "He is an umfundisi, a parson, and he has never been to Johannesburg" (Paton 23). The parish and mission school function as what Hall calls "apparatuses" that produce identity by positioning Kumalo inside racial hierarchy (Hall 226). Rituals of confession and communal worship grant him moral capital yet bind him to a racial order he cannot name. Thus, the article reads the church not as refuge but as a training ground where Kumalo learns how



to appear as a legitimate Black Christian subject under apartheid's gaze.

In *Paradise*, Qur'anic ethics of trusteeship and the ritual of debt structure Yusuf's subjectivity through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry the colonised subject's repetition of dominant norms as "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86). Aziz declares, "Fear God and speak the truth" (Gurnah 54), invoking amanah as moral law, yet Yusuf is "handed over without a word, as if he were part of the payment" (Gurnah 12). This article argues that piety here is inseparable from political economy. The duka and caravan function as institutions where Islamic ethics mimic merchant respectability while serving German colonial capital. Yusuf's silence is not pious submission but what Bhabha calls "sly civility," a dissimulation that complies while withholding interiority (Bhabha 132). By reading debt as liturgy, the paper refuses to separate religion from the ledger.

Bird Summons constructs Muslim womanhood through Sufi doctrine and pilgrimage, enacting what Bhabha theorizes as the "Third Space" of enunciation where "cultural signs are negotiated without synthesis" (Bhabha 37). "We are on a pilgrimage, not a holiday" (Aboulela 45) reframes exile as

guidance: "You are not lost, you are being led" (Aboulela 201). The Highland grave of Lady Evelyn becomes a Third Space where Islamic mysticism meets Celtic landscape and British secularism. This paper contends that displacement does not erase faith but relocates its grammar. Salma, Moni, and Iman must perform piety under Hall's "unstable points" of diasporic positioning, where professional credentials collapse "I was a doctor once, but here I am nothing" (Aboulela 77; Hall 236). The analysis therefore tracks how the women turn pilgrimage into counter-liturgy against neoliberal deskilling.

Wahala translates doctrine into Pentecostal prosperity gospel, revealing Hall's claim that identity is produced "within representation" rather than outside it (Hall 222). The megachurch and seed-sowing ritual "If you want God to disgrace your enemies, sow a seed of one hundred thousand naira today!" (May 183) institutionalise faith as public performance. Tithes, dress, and WhatsApp testimony produce "blessed" subjects under a digital gaze. This paper argues that the group chat is a new regime of representation. Piety is audited through peer surveillance: "Type amen to claim it" converts prayer into metrics. Bhabha's mimicry reappears here as self-



orientalism the performance of “African spirituality” for Instagram Live, where authenticity is “almost the same” as algorithmic favor, “but not quite” (Bhabha 86). The study thus refuses to treat the digital as post-religious; it is where belief is now adjudicated.

Across all four texts, doctrine provides narrative, ritual provides performance, and institutions provide the gaze, yet each construction is hybrid in Bhabha’s sense: “the negotiation of difference within a field of power” (Bhabha 34). Mission hymns carry Zulu grief in Paton, Qur’anic verses underwrite indenture in Gurnah, dhikr occurs in a Highland graveyard in Aboulela, and altars go live on Instagram in May. This article rejects readings that celebrate hybridity as happy fusion. Instead, it shows hybridity as the structural condition of faith under empire, capital, and code. Kumalo’s Anglicanism, Yusuf’s Islam, Salma’s Sufism, and Ronke’s Pentecostalism are all “translated” in the Third Space, bearing the mark of the powers that require their enunciation (Bhabha 38). The paper’s voice insists: there is no pure doctrine to return to, only negotiated practice.

Faith is tested when doctrine meets law, economy, or gender, exposing what Bhabha calls the

ambivalence of mimicry (Bhabha 88). In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Absalom’s murder creates theological crisis. Kumalo prays, “I have sinned greatly, and I ask to be forgiven” (Paton 253), yet forgiveness cannot restore land. This paper argues that mimicry’s limit emerges here: Christian forgiveness is “almost the same” as justice, “but not quite.” In *Paradise*, debt silences prayer. Yusuf “did not know how to pray for himself” (Gurnah 71) because speech risks price: “everything has a price” (Gurnah 112). Islamic ethics mimic merchant respectability yet is not sovereign under German rule. The analysis thus frames crisis not as a loss of faith but as the moment regimes of representation reveal their coercion.

Bird Summons and *Wahala* reveal how piety is gendered and surveilled, confirming Hall’s claim that identity is made through “the positions of enunciation” available to marginalized subjects (Hall 222). Salma laments, “I was a doctor once, but here I am nothing” (Aboulela 77). Piety is policed: “Do not use your tongue to cut the rope that holds you” (Aboulela 174). In *Wahala*, prosperity doctrine ties grace to money and fertility: “We’ve spent over six million naira, and still nothing” (May 214). Group chats police “bad friend energy,” turning piety into a ledger. This paper maintains that doubt is not



the opposite of faith but its shadow. Bhabha's "sly civility" helps read the women's compliance as tactical: they perform piety while smuggling critique, solidarity, and rage inside the ritual (Bhabha 132). Religion, the article argues, is an apparatus of judgment that women learn to manipulate.

Crisis generates new ritual in the Third Space, where Bhabha locates "the emergence of new political objects" (Bhabha 37). Kumalo's mountain prayer "He went up into the mountain, and he prayed" (Paton 259) meets James Jarvis's material ethics: "There would be milk for the children, and a new church, and a dam for the valley" (Paton 245). This paper reads the dam as a Third Space object where penance is measured in water, not words. Yusuf reconfigures faith as "caravanserai quiet." By withholding speech, he enacts ambivalence as agency: his unreadability resists commodification. The Highland pilgrimage in *Bird Summons* creates a Sufi-Celtic Third Space where movement, not mosque, becomes liturgy: "You are not lost, you are being led" (Aboulela 201). The study argues that displacement produces ritual innovation, not just loss.

In *Wahala*, digital altars emerge as Third Spaces where Hall's regimes of representation collide

with Bhabha's mimicry. WhatsApp prayer chains "Type amen to claim it" and voice-note testimonies recast ritual as portable and peer-policed. The group chat is a Third Space where church authority and female intimacy collide, allowing both surveillance and solidarity. This paper insists that to ignore these platforms is to misread where postcolonial religion now lives. Mimicry here is algorithmic: believers repeat prosperity scripts to become visible to followers and God, yet the repetition is "not quite" sovereign it is indexed to likes, tithes, and fertility outcomes. The article's voice is clear: the digital is not secular; it is a new mission field with its own doctrines of value.

Displacement thickens religious identity with cultural memory, producing what Hall calls identity "through difference" (Hall 235). Ubuntu frames Kumalo's forgiveness, izzat governs Yusuf's silence, dhikr travels with Aboulela's pilgrims, and "home training" scripts Pentecostal piety in *Wahala*. Mrs. Lithebe's hosting (Paton 57), women's work in the duka, Salma's spiritual housekeeping, and the prayer-chain management in *Wahala* show how cooking, dress, and hosting become liturgy. This paper argues that gendered labour is not peripheral to faith but central to its reproduction. Language and liturgy are



hybridised: Paton's biblical cadence "Cry, the Beloved Country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear" (Paton 103) wraps Zulu grief in King James English. Gurnah's unglossed Arabic, Aboulela's heteroglossia, and May's code-switching create multilingual sacred vernaculars. Moral economies turn ritual into transactions: lobola and land in Paton, zakat and rehani in Gurnah, remittance and deskilling in Aboulela, and seed offerings in May. Belief, the article concludes, is accountable in cash, care, and culture, and it is in these transactions that postcolonial religious subjects are made.

Findings

Across these narratives, churches, caravanserais, shrines, and megachurches tutor adherents in diction, comportment, and visibility required for sanctioned membership. Creed, ceremony, and supervisory observation jointly fabricate subjectivity, yet such manufacturing operates inside stratified arrangements of race, capital, and platform governance. This article maintains that theology cannot be divorced from structural power. Spiritual rupture, indebtedness, civic marginalization, and algorithmic scrutiny fail to void devotion; rather they illuminate its material prerequisites. Quietude, summit supplication, wayfaring rites, and

messaging forums surface as blended observances responding to uprootedness.

Third Spaces exceed language; they materialize as reservoirs, trading stalls, uplands, and chat applications. Such sites permit Bhabha's "sly civility," whereby imitation outruns domination while appearing compliant. Feminised household, emotional, and online exertion maintains congregations, while polyglot worship bargains for membership beyond frontiers. The study argues that infrastructure, not merely discourse, constitutes contemporary belief. Regimes of representation thus run through concrete, currency, and code, positioning practitioners at precarious junctions of admission and exile.

Selfhood remains entwined with the hazard of enacting reverence for hegemonic viewers. Kumalo's lament, Yusuf's illegibility, Salma's mystique, and broadcast exorcisms all flirt with marketization. This paper therefore refuses to disentangle resistance from spectacle. Mimicry's ambiguity simultaneously generates authority and courts exchange value, demonstrating that within displacement, piety functions as both tactic and commodity, never insulated from the gazes that authorize it.



By reading doctrine, ritual, and institution as pedagogical technologies shaped by race, debt, and digital platforms, this article offers a model for confronting contemporary crises of belonging. It reframes policy and community debates around migration, religious nationalism, and online radicalization: faith is not a private antidote to displacement but a public infrastructure negotiated under surveillance. Recognising WhatsApp prayer chains, crowdfunded tithes, and hybrid pilgrimages as Third Spaces allows scholars, faith leaders, and policymakers to design interventions that acknowledge how believers already exercise “sly civility” complying with state or algorithmic demands while smuggling solidarity, critique, and care through encrypted or aesthetic channels.

The analysis proposes solutions that move beyond banning or celebrating religion: instead, map the material networks where piety is audited, fund the gendered labour that sustains diasporic worship, and treat multilingual liturgy as civic literacy. In an era of datafile identity and border policing, the paper argues that agency will be found not in escaping institutions, but in redesigning the infrastructural conditions under which belief is taught, performed, and judged.

Conclusion

Religion in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Paradise*, *Bird Summons*, and *Wahala* functions neither as a static creed nor as false consciousness. This paper has shown that faith is a contested production negotiated at the intersection of doctrine and displacement. Bhabha’s concepts of ambivalence and Third Space, together with Hall’s model of identity as positioning, reveal that belief operates simultaneously as refuge and as apparatus. It is audited by courts, caravans, secular bureaucracies, and WhatsApp group chats, yet it is continually rerouted through mountains, silences, pilgrimages, and digital altars. The analysis demonstrates that religious identity is not inherited intact but is taught, performed, and policed under conditions of racial, economic, and digital surveillance.

The trajectory from belief to belonging is not linear but transacted. Across these texts, lobola, zakat, remittance, and seed offerings show how doctrine becomes inseparable from material exchange. Postcolonial religious identity thus emerges as a hybrid practice gendered, multilingual, and economic that converts creed into ways of staying, speaking, and paying to belong. Kumalo’s mountain prayer is answered with a dam; Yusuf’s piety is collateralized as



rehani; Salma's pilgrimage counters deskilling; Ronke's tithes purchase visibility. This article therefore argues that ritual is also infrastructure. Faith persists by attaching itself to land, debt, care work, and screens, turning each into a site where the sacred is negotiated rather than simply received.

Future postcolonial scholarship must read religion not as residual tradition but as a present, dynamic site of negotiation. Infrastructure, silence, landscape, and digital platforms are now primary locations of the sacred, and they demand new critical attention. This paper proposes that crisis be treated as method not as a breakdown of faith but as the condition that generates new liturgies. Likewise, self-orientalism should be understood as the constitutive risk of agency under surveillance: performing piety for dominant gazes is how subjects secure legibility, even as they risk commodification. Only by adopting this lens can we map how dislocation has mutated from territorial dispossession to networked precarity, and how faith continues to reconfigure belonging in the interstices of the economic, the legal, and the digital.

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