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## Jane Hiddleston. *Writing After Postcolonialism: Francophone North African Literature in Transition*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

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**Abstract**

Review of Jane Hiddleston. *Writing After Postcolonialism: Francophone North African Literature in Transition*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. vii + 291 pp.

**Keywords**

postcolonialism, North Africa, Maghreb, Francophone literature

Jane Hiddleston. *Writing After Postcolonialism: Francophone North African Literature in Transition*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. vii + 291 pp.

Jane Hiddleston's analysis of Francophone North African literature published after 1980 manages the delicate task of tracking the impact of context on literary writing without imposing a rigid, common set of national or regional characteristics on writers as diverse as Salim Bachi, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Kamel Daoud, Tahar Djaout, Assia Djébar, Abdellatif Khatibi, Fawzi Mellah, and Leïla Sebbar. Hiddleston's focus on open-ended interpretations of Maghrebi texts serves as a rich organizing principle in this book, resisting the idea of defining Tunisian, Algerian, or Moroccan identity with reductive literary traits. She achieves this diversity of perspectives in part by including in her study writers who continue to work and publish in the Maghreb and others who write in a European context.

By choosing the three frameworks of postcolonial writing, world literature, and the paradigm of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Hiddleston demonstrates how these contemporary writers in the Maghreb use their narratives in order to challenge nationalist or extremist religious *doxa*. One might expect to find such oppressive ideologies countered by a celebration of literature with its own specific, clear-cut agenda. This is not the case. Hiddleston demonstrates instead the open-ended, multivalent qualities of the *Maghrébin* texts that she has chosen to study. She disassociates, for instance, the concept of "world literature" from a false sense of universalism and draws instead on Françoise Lionnet's emphasis on multilingualism and palimpsestic form or Boualem Sansal's intercultural exchanges in his critical essays in order to explore how *littérature-monde*, that is, 'world literature' casts knowledge not as "truth" or certainty but as continually evolving, transcultural perceptions. By the same token, Hiddleston's emphasis on *One Thousand and One Nights* does not idealize this canonical work as quintessentially North African; Hiddleston highlights instead this paradigmatic text's transnational origins as well as its hybrid forms, and she tracks how it contributes to ever-evolving intertexts like Bachi's *Amours et aventures de Sindbad le Marin* ('The Loves and Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor,' 2010) or Abdelfattah Kilito's *Dites-moi le songe* ('Tell Me a Lie,' 2010). At stake in her exploration of recent North African narratives written in French is to demonstrate how "the literary work is a site where thoughts, questions, doubts and desires converge and conflict" (91). By explicating these literary struggles against dogmatism, Hiddleston draws attention to the multiple strategies used to affirm the dialogic, creative potential of literature, and in particular, of narrative.

The book begins with three chapters that focus on the literary and cultural theories informing Hiddleston's analysis; this includes a chapter on the different motivations associated with the act of writing within the North African context. For the bulk of the book, Hiddleston adopts a thematic structure to pair texts in

unexpected but insightful ways. For instance, she juxtaposes Ben Jelloun's *L'écrivain public* ('The Public Writer,' 1983), which multiplies narrative perspectives, with Daoud's *La préface du nègre* ('The Ghostwriter's Preface,' 2015). This first juxtaposition proves fruitful for contextualizing both authors' literary endeavor—to construct an implicitly critical representation of Hassan II's Morocco and to call into question the myth of Algerian independence and national heroism. As a result, despite the metatextual focus of the two works, they do not slip into a narrative narcissism. She then contrasts Djaout's *L'invention du désert* ('The Invention of the Desert,' 1987) and Bachi's *La Kahéna* (2003) in a chapter devoted to "rewriting the past" creatively, while the counterpoint of Mellah's *Le conclave des pleureuses* ('The Conclave of the Women Mourners,' 1993) and Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête* (*The Meursault Investigation*, 2016) plots the tensions between investigative writing and the culture of storytelling and myth. That tension is especially significant when Daoud's narrator, the "brother" of the murdered Arab in Camus's *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*, 1942), assertively re-appropriates the protagonist's narrative. On the one hand, the narrator sets out to counter the colonial erasure of the murdered Arab in Camus's text. The anti-colonialist narrator is himself called into question, however, in that he confuses Camus the author with Meursault the protagonist. In the chapter entitled "Writing between Languages: Literature as Translation," Khatibi's *Un été à Stockholm* ('A Summer in Stockholm,' 1992) is read alongside Sebbar's *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* ('I do not speak the language of my father,' 2003). The multilingual identities of the characters in both works highlight the limitations of a reductive, monolingual approach to defining a narrowly national literature. The creative, non-linear approaches to translation in Khatibi and Sebbar's works perform a more polyphonic, mobile form of identity that in Khatibi's work disassociates language, identity, and ownership, albeit more affirmatively than Sebbar's narrative does.

The two final chapters preceding the conclusion shift the focus from the production of texts to their reception. In "Francophone Letters: Literature as Encounter," Hiddleston reads Djébar's *L'amour, la fantasia* (*Fantasia*, 1985) against *Le même livre* (*Abrahamic Tongues*, 1985) by J. Hassoun and Khatibi to analyze the prevalence of the epistolary motif in both texts. Djébar's ambivalent treatment of letters in her novel may be more familiar to readers whereas Hassoun's and Khatibi's exchange of letters tackles the ongoing challenge of an intercultural dialogue between Jews and Arabs. "The Power of Reading: Living with/through Books" continues the reflections of the previous chapter by mapping the act of reading in Djaout's posthumously published *Le dernier été de la raison* (*The Last Summer of Reason*, 1999) alongside Djébar's *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* ('No Place in the House of my Father,' 2010). The reference to Derek Attridge's *Singularity of Literature* (2004) helps to bring into focus the ethical

dimension of reading: “a call to respond properly to alterity, to relate to it but not to appropriate and reduce it” (231).

Hiddleston’s own trajectory of reading North African texts brings to light unexpected echoes that connect works separated by geography in the Maghreb. *Writing After Postcolonialism* provides insight into an important sweep of texts by writers who deliberately place themselves outside of the nationalist framework by writing in French, decentering and challenging an exclusive, nationalist ideology through literary projects that celebrate multivalence, self-doubt, provisional and mobile meaning. If there is a minor downside to this collection, it is the proliferation of open-ended conclusions, which could generate indetermination and self-questioning and become vulnerable to more affirmative exclusivist ideologies. This concern is less a negative feature of *Writing After Postcolonialism* than a reflection generated by this engaging study, which is without a doubt an excellent resource for scholars interested in contemporary North African literature written in French. Jane Hiddleston has included subtle and detailed readings of the primary texts by integrating a varied and relevant theoretical framework.

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