❙ **Book Review** ❙

Politics and Digital Literature in the Middle East: Perspectives on Online Text and Context
Nele Lenze. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 178 pages

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Politics and Digital Literature in the Middle East: Perspectives on Online Text and Context, a comprehensive monograph with an insightful introduction, outlines the personal, social, and political perspectives of the text and context of online literary works in the Middle East. Nele Lenze presents an analysis of various perspectives about digital literatures and their contexts from Middle Eastern states such as Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, and Bahrain (Lenze, 2019, p. 10).

Online literature has emerged worldwide in the past two decades, and the same is the case with the Arabic-speaking countries. Thus the research on online literary works is a new field of studies in the context of these countries. In fact, online literary works may be understood as a perpetuation and part of existing literature. An analysis of some blog posts and stories posted in forums shows that digital literary works have many things in common with print literary texts, especially narration, language, and aesthetic appeal. This new medium has changed how readers take in the reading material. With this new channel, readers do not remain passive receivers, they can now vigorously express their thoughts, respond through online interactions, and challenge the views being presented. Thus, the distinctiveness of online literature is the active participation of readers or viewers in the form of live comments and redistribution of this literature. *Politics and Digital Literature in the Middle East* subjects the above-mentioned aspects of online literature to a detailed analysis, presenting various perspectives on online literature in major Arabic-speaking countries and tracing its links with politics in the Middle East.

This book has very skillfully contextualized this comparatively new area of literary works and highlighted the differences as well as similarities of online literature

with printed texts by comparing it to earlier literary texts from the 1990s and the latest postmodern works. The comparison drawn has revealed that online literature tends to have the qualities of simpler narration and a clear linear plot, while it shows resemblances with earlier print literary oeuvres from the 1990s in terms of its auto-fictional features. Then, an in-depth comparison between two major online literary forums, blogs, and forums, is drawn with great care and effort. Blogs and forums have been analyzed separately because they differ in writing style and visualization. This is evidence of the author's keen observation and study of the online literature of the Arabic-speaking countries, although she has given examples from other countries too. Online publishing has also given an outlet to feminist activism because most female authors could not find appropriate platforms to publish their works due to patriarchal control of the publishing and printing sectors.

Structurally, the book is logically divided into seven chapters: Beginnings, How to Read Arabic Literature Online, Style and Media Make-Up of Digital Literature, Socio-Political Expressions Through Language and Narration, Participatory Culture, Who Are the Actors? The portrayal of Heroes, Challenges of Online Distribution, and Concluding Thoughts. The chapters are arranged according to the need to understand the digital text and how it can be presented, beginning with a look at the outer cover—it's *make-up and visual* components (Lenze, 2019, p. 2). Next comes what appeals to the reader most after reading the initial part of texts: *Language and narration,* which immediately make the communicative aspect of online literature noticeable. These salient features are underscored in the chapter on *participation culture* that brings forth the elements of interactivity that distinguish online literature from printed works. The participation of the reader or viewer is stimulated through an emotional and academic linkage with stories and poems online. An important aspect of literature is the identification and that is achieved through the protagonist of the story—this aspect is illuminated in the next chapter on the *portrayal of heroes.* Here, the analysis of the portrayal of heroes clearly establishes that there are certain *limitations and challenges* which are a significant element of online writing and distribution. The discussion of the above aspects from different perspectives in the book under review helps the reader to understand the genre of digital literature in the context of politics of the Arabic-speaking world.

The writer has presented concrete examples of macro-level case studies and applied linguistic issues as well as context analysis, such as changing social, historical, and political contexts. Also, this book shows the relations among various fields of action, genres, discourses, and text that are emphasized with the use of relevant

theoretical apparatuses. The writer has relied on text analyses performed by her fellow researchers, both from the West and the Middle East, all of whom are appropriately credited in the footnotes. Extracts from the original digital works referred to in this book have been chosen to represent certain criteria such as typicality and frequency in representation. This puts stylistic and aesthetic distinctions in literary works from the Arabic countries in focus. However, it cannot be considered a full-length assemblage of original works/sources.

As major elements of the text analysis, visual aspects, as well as relevant socio-political issues, have been discussed. The correlation between individual identities and collective goals in online writings is discussed at great length, while issues of publishing restrictions and censorship are highlighted but not in great detail. The theoretical approaches employed in this work, for the analysis of the general issues at hand, fall into two major categories: Theories that are concerned with literature in general, and theories related to digital culture. Here the writer has used earlier research on printed literature in Arabic as the main theoretical guide for her examination and analysis.

Although the book is a comprehensive analysis of the digital literature in Arabic-speaking countries, certain lapses can be observed. One major shortcoming detected is redundancy and repetition of the same stories, events, and poems in every chapter which challenges the reader's ability to remain focused and interested for long. The question of modernity and postmodernity in online literature compared to print literature is raised but not fully addressed or discussed. Thirdly, it seems that to avoid censorship or outright banning in Arab countries, an analysis of the full political implications of digital literature in the Gulf countries has not been provided. In many instances, it feels like the writer has softened the tone and avoided details and comments on censorship by the political regimes of Arabic speaking countries rather than attempt a genuine presentation of the topic under discussion, and the experiences of the writers of online literature are not given their due place. Thus the political aspects of digital literature are not fully established, even though the title of the book begins with the word "politics."

However, this book, *Politics and Digital Literature in the Middle East*, remains successful in establishing its objective that literature is essentially an element of cultural expression that plays an important role in the growth of social structures. It includes a good analysis of a variety of Arabic digital literature on tragic, comic, historical, and contemporary issues. A common thread in all these online writings is their focus on the past or memory and global impact, as well as on self-projection or identity demonstration within a social and political context. The book is a

good commentary on short stories and poems from online forums and blogs of Arabic-speaking countries, highlighting Arabic culture, societal trends regarding changing gender roles, and the social and political outlook of the people. With simple language and easily understandable examples, the book can be adjudged a good attempt to introduce to the world the digital literature being written and discussed in the Arabic-speaking world.

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