Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 49
Issue 1 *Refugee Voices in Contemporary Literature*
Article 14

2025

Ieme Van der Poel. New Literary Voices of the Moroccan Diaspora: Republic of Cousins. Liverpool UP, 2022.

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Recommended Citation

Elsayed, Hanan (2025) "Ieme Van der Poel. New Literary Voices of the Moroccan Diaspora: Republic of Cousins. Liverpool UP, 2022.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 49: Iss. 1, Article 14.
https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2313

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Abstract

Review of Ieme Van der Poel, *New Literary Voices of the Moroccan Diaspora: Republic of Cousins*. Liverpool UP, 2022. 213 pp.

Keywords

Moroccan diaspora

This book review is available in Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature: https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol49/iss1/14

Ieme Van der Poel, *New Literary Voices of the Moroccan Diaspora: Republic of Cousins*. Liverpool UP, 2022. 213 pp.

This book sets out to examine literary works written in French, Spanish, Catalan, and Dutch by "new" Europeans of Moroccan origin, with particular attention to the historical context of the migration wave of the 1960s and early 1970s. Its effort to bring lesser-known texts in multiple languages into dialogue is certainly commendable. Notably, the inclusion of emerging authors such as Hafid Bouazza and Najat El Hachmi adds value by showcasing the voices and perspectives of a younger generation of writers.

The first of seven short chapters, "Writing absence: On migrant literature and 'Moroccanness,'" examines the overshadowing of the country of origin and the immigrant's past in European lands. However, the binary division between "citizens of Moroccan descent" and the "indigenous population" lacks nuance and appears to adopt nationalist language. It overlooks the complex and plural identities resulting from mixed marriages and trans-European migrations that characterize the populations of France, Spain, Belgium, and the Netherlands to varying degrees. This binary characterization frequently reappears in the text, in phrases such as "the original population and these newcomers" (35) and "the native population and the new arrivals" (45). Similarly**,** the simplistic division of the Mediterranean, coupled with the phrasing—"before its northern shore became part of the Christian world and its southern shore was converted to Islam" (6)—requires critical reassessment.

In a book focused on the Moroccan diaspora, the discussion often shifts toward the Maghreb, as seen in Chapter 2, "The European-Maghrebi Cultural Exchange." At times, this shift is accompanied by questionable statements or definitions. For instance, Sufism is described as "a moderate Islamic movement that has its roots in North Africa" (64), yet no scholarly references are provided to support this geographic or doctrinal characterization. Similarly, the portrayal of Salafism as synonymous with political Islam lacks nuance and is presented without supporting evidence or recommended readings. While Salafism appears in the index, Islam itself is conspicuously absent—a striking omission given Najat El Hachmi's engagement with Islamic traditions. The opening lines of *L'últim patriarca* directly invoke the classical Islamic and Arabic convention of genealogical identification (*nasab*), yet van der Poel curiously attributes it to "the epic tradition as well as biblical texts" (73), effectively erasing the novel's grounding in Islamic cultural frameworks.

The renowned Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015) emerges as an unexpected focus in Chapter 4, "Feminism and/or autobiography: Reading Fatima Mernissi against Simone de Beauvoir." Van der Poel adopts an expansive conception of diasporic writing, extending it to include Morocco-based authors who do not write in their mother tongue — a move she

describes as "a form of diasporic writing from within" (3). However, this chapter sits somewhat uneasily within the book's broader framework, particularly given that Mernissi herself does not articulate a sense of internal diaspora. Moreover, the question posed—"Can Fatima Mernissi be considered the present-day Beauvoir, in the Arab world as well as in the West?" (87)—raises two significant concerns. First, using Beauvoir as a reference point and centering the discussion around her in a study of the Moroccan diaspora risks diluting the book's focus and reinforces a Eurocentric framework. Second, the framing of the question reflects insufficient acknowledgment of earlier feminist figures in the Arab world, such as the Egyptian Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) and the Palestinian-Lebanese May Ziadeh (1886-1941). Likewise, some analogies appear ill-suited, as in the discussion of Rajae Benchemsi's novel: "For, while most of the novel's characters have studied at the Sorbonne, and are Gallicized and Westernized as a result of that experience, it is highly unlikely that that venerable institution retains traces of the sojourn there of this North African elite" (63). In addition, broad statements such as "the condition of Muslim women" (55) and "The Arab and Christian cultures meet, but do not mix" (58) lack nuance and would benefit from more critical and context-sensitive analysis.

Interestingly, Mernissi reappears in the title of Chapter 5, "Fatima Mernissi's Concept of Female Subalternity and the Experience of Migration," but her work receives limited attention in the chapter itself. The final section, "Re-reading Julia Kristeva within the Context of Migration," feels particularly tangential and further undermines the chapter's coherence. Similarly, the section titled "From doppelgänger to ethnic or racial double" in the final chapter on Jewish-Moroccan literature also appears misaligned and distracts from the central texts. Together, these digressions contribute to the broader structural inconsistencies that characterize the book.

A compelling aspect of the discussion in chapter 6 concerns the racism frequently experienced by the Moroccan diaspora in Europe. While Van der Poel repeatedly emphasizes the absence of a shared colonial history in Belgium and the Netherlands, this distinction alone does not shield the Moroccan diaspora—or Muslims more broadly—from racism in these countries. Islamophobia in Europe has deeper historical roots that long predate the colonial period. At times, Van der Poel resorts to euphemistic language to convey growing anti-Islamic sentiment: "The Low countries' long-standing tradition of religious tolerance, at least with regard to Islam, has gradually been showing unmistakable signs of exhaustion" (131).

Throughout the book, discussions of various theoretical frameworks—Todorov, Bakhtin, Beauvoir, Liz Stanley, Abdelmalek Sayad, Cynthia Wong, among others—are often introduced at the beginning of chapters, but they can be somewhat lengthy, drawing attention away from the primary literary corpus.

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DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.2313

Additionally, the book's limited engagement with literary history makes it more challenging to place the works within broader literary traditions. This is further complicated by the absence of sustained literary analysis—especially with regard to aesthetic innovation, formal experimentation, and stylistic nuance—making it harder to fully assess the works' contributions to contemporary Moroccan literature. Finally, the book would benefit from more rigorous copyediting and proofreading, as numerous errors and misspellings detract from its overall readability.

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